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1. Executive Summary

The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) ran in 2018 for the tenth consecutive year. This year the survey achieved its highest ever response, with over 100 institutions from across the UK gathering information from 85,880 students. This report is of PTES 2018, but has been informed by analysis of the near 400,000 responses to PTES since the redesign of the survey in 2014.

The analysis in this report aims to reflect the diversity of the postgraduate taught (PGT) cohort, in terms of their motivations, aims and experiences. However, there are some key findings that apply across the sector. For example, analysis of motivations has found that the more factors a student can reflect upon as having motivated their choice of course and institution, the more positive that student is about their experience. This underlines that student perceptions are a subjective reflection of how the course and wider learning environment suits the individual student.

The analysis of trends for PTES has been made more difficult by the impact of strike action across a number of participating institutions in 2018, which appears to have had a negative impact on the student experience at most institutions affected. More widely, there has been a slight decline in the key measures of course organisation and preparation for career that raises a slight concern, though the reasons for this are not clear. There are strong positive trends around resources, feedback and perceptions of being involved in how courses are run.

Overall satisfaction remains very positive, with just 1 out of 10 students dissatisfied with their experience. This is largely driven by very positive perceptions of teaching delivery. When PGT study does not go as well as the student expected, they may consider leaving their course. Overall, 22% of students in the survey have considered leaving their studies.

There are wide differences across the student body in the perceptions of their study. Often, what can be seen in PTES results is the outcome of many overlapping demographic and delivery factors. In exploring the diverse student cohort, this year’s report has selected age, domicile and ethnicity to focus upon. Older students are generally more positive about their studies. Some of this is explained by differences in what and how older students study, but may be due as much to different expectations as experience. Domicile is another key difference between students, and another area where expectations may play a strong role. For example, African students have a very similar profile to North American students across a number of factors, but very different perceptions of their time studying in the UK.

Using the 5-year dataset for PTES has enabled more factors to be explored in examining trends and differences between groups, and ethnicity in particular. Accounting for some difficulty in establishing whether a student is UK-domiciled, the results present a challenge for institutions in how they can meet the needs of students from particular backgrounds. Students of Asian or Mixed ethnicity, and students identifying as Gypsy or Traveller, have much higher levels of negative perceptions than other ethnic groups.

The great diversity of the PGT cohort in terms of their expectations, motivations, aims and needs presents a challenge to those seeking to enhance the student experience of teaching and learning. PTES will continue to support enhancement within institutions, from course level to strategic decision-making, alongside providing a channel for the student voice to the wider sector on the PGT experience and what drives it.
2. Headlines

There have been strong upward trends in feedback, resources, and aspects of engagement.

There have been downward trends in course organisation and preparation for career.

The more motivations that study choice ticks, the more positive the student experience is.

Very positive perceptions of teaching in general, and support for learning in particular, drive positive results for overall satisfaction.

North American and EU students have relatively negative perceptions of assessment and their experience overall.

African and Asian students have relatively positive perceptions of organisation and their experience overall.
3. Methodology

3.1 Approach

The Advance HE Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey was first piloted in 2009 and since then has become well embedded within the UK as the major survey-based barometer of the taught postgraduate experience. The survey was redesigned in 2014 after extensive research and consultation with the sector. Whilst the core survey is stable, it continues to be developed with the aim of reflecting the key sector concerns and accommodating student and institutional diversity. Any student taking a course at Masters level that is more than a single module is eligible to take part.

PTES has been designed to provide key information to support strategic decisions alongside detailed information and open comments that can be disseminated to course teams. Institutions administer the survey through the Jisc Online Surveys platform and have ownership of their data, which they can choose to publish or not as they believe appropriate. A range of benchmarking is provided to support interpretation, both online and through Advance HE benchmarking dashboards and tables, enabling the use of the data in combination with other evidence to drive enhancement for the following year. Institutions may also publish top ten rankings, benchmark comparisons, and anonymised comments to inform prospective students.

The survey window for PTES 2018 was open from 1 February to 15 June 2018. Institutions were able to choose when to run the survey within this window, as long as the survey was open for a minimum of three weeks.

3.2 Participation

As can be seen from Figure 1, the total number of students responding to PTES 2018 was 85,880, representing a 29% response rate. The number of respondents to PTES has continued to grow year on year, however the response rate represented a slight dip from 2017. The sample of PTES is across 106 institutions covering all four home nations, and with institutions ranging from small and specialist to the largest in the sector, see Appendix 1. The validity of the following analysis is due to this wide coverage, which enables focus upon particular populations and kinds of institutions to give a clear picture of postgraduate provision in the UK.

![Figure 1: Response and participation in PTES by year](image-url)
4. Why do students choose their course?

4.1 Motivation for studying at a particular institution

Participants in the survey were asked about their motivations for studying at their particular institution. Figure 2 presents the results graphically, broken down by whether students studied full time or part time. Whilst important to both groups of students, reputation was more important to full-time students, as was future career. Although location was less important overall, for UK students it was more important than reputation for both full- and part-time students. Part-time students were more likely to focus on factors such as course delivery, or be motivated by employers. Motivations for choosing a particular institution have remained stable over recent years.¹

![Figure 2: Motivations for studying at this institution, by mode of study](image)

Overall reputation of institution: 52% full-time, 40% part-time
Reputation in subject area / dept: 41% full-time, 31% part-time
The content of the course: 40% full-time, 40% part-time
Location of institution: 38% full-time, 32% part-time
Graduates from here have good careers: 20% full-time, 8% part-time
It was recommended to me: 19% full-time, 20% part-time
Way course structured or assessed: 17% full-time, 24% part-time
Reputation of the course tutors: 15% full-time, 14% part-time
Studied at this institution before: 15% full-time, 17% part-time
Funding was available: 14% full-time, 18% part-time
The cost of the course: 13% full-time, 12% part-time
Delivery is flexible to fit around my life: 9% full-time, 43% part-time
Only institution offering this course: 7% full-time, 10% part-time
My employer advised me to do it: 3% full-time, 11% part-time

¹ Graphs have their base size as a range from minimum to maximum. For example, at the bottom left of Figure 2 above, n=24,957 to 60,666 indicates that the minimum base size any percentage is based upon is 24,957 responses (here, this refers to part-time students) and the maximum base size is 60,666 (full-time students).
Taught postgraduates are a diverse cohort with many different expectations, motivations and needs. This report aims to illustrate how these vary and interact with experience. For example, Figure 3 shows the relationship between age and selected student motivations for choosing the institution. Here, we see a preference for greater flexibility of delivery for older students. As students grow older, the importance of reputation of the institution decreases as a motivating factor, as does the focus on career. For students aged 25 and under, and for older students, the content of the course is more of a factor, likely linked to freedom from concerns about specific employment routes.

Figure 4 illustrates how students from different countries differ markedly in motivation. Having studied at the institution before is a relatively important factor for UK students. Reputation is generally a more important motivation for international students. Other factors, such as course content and institutional location, are more varied across different domiciled groups.
4.2 Motivation for undertaking the course

Students were asked about their main motivation for undertaking the course; the results are illustrated in Figure 5. It can be seen that career and employment prospects are the main reasons for students undertaking their course. The motivations of students are not the same for all qualifications. Those on a diploma or certificate route are more likely to have a specific job focus. Students studying for a Postgraduate Certificate were twice as likely as those studying a taught Masters to be motivated by a requirement to enter a particular profession. Conversely, students studying a taught Masters were twice as likely to be motivated by personal interest in the course.

Improving employment prospects in general, and progressing to a higher-level qualification, are more common motivations for taught Masters students. As with motivations for choosing a particular institution, analysis of the data found that motivations for undertaking postgraduate courses have remained stable over time.

![Figure 5: Motivation to undertake this course, by type of qualification](image)

- Progress in current career path: 67%, 64%, 57%
- Improve employment prospects: 41%, 34%, 56%
- For personal interest: 33%, 24%, 48%
- Progress to a higher-level qualification: 22%, 17%, 34%
- To change my current career: 24%, 23%, 22%
- Requirement to enter a profession: 30%, 38%, 18%
- Requirements of current job: 13%, 14%, 7%

\( n = 5,585 \text{ to } 69,610 \)
PTES allows students to select more than one motivation for studying, and three-quarters of students indicate more than one key motivation. To simplify analysis that will be used for the rest of the report, students have been allocated to four groups: Academic focus, Specific job focus, General career focus, Personal interest.\(^2\)

In Figure 6, the motivation to attend the institution is broken down by the motivation to study their particular course. We see that reputation is most important to students with an academic focus – studying to progress to a higher-level qualification. The reputation of the subject area or department is also very important to those studying for a specific job. Unsurprisingly, the career prospects of students in the institution is particularly important for students motivated by future career, particularly those taking the qualification with specific job prospects in mind. Perhaps more surprising, whilst location of institution is most important for those with a specific job focus, it is significantly less so for those only motivated by personal interest. Students motivated to study their course by personal interest alone were also most likely to only indicate a single motivation for attending the institution, whereas those with an academic or specific job focus were more likely to indicate multiple motivations, around reputation, delivery, content and so on.

\(^2\) This variable was constructed from a hierarchy where: a qualification as a requirement was coded as a ‘Specific job focus’, regardless of other motivations; then those students looking to progress to a higher degree were coded as ‘Academic focus’, regardless of other motivations; then those students indicating interest in career were coded as ‘General career focus’; and finally those students who had only selected personal interest as a motivation were coded as ‘Personal interest’.
5. Overview of the taught postgraduate experience

5.1 Trends in taught postgraduate satisfaction

Figure 7 presents the results for the core areas assessed in PTES, ordered by the highest- to lowest-scoring areas for 2018 results. The results have been positive since 2014 and trends generally positive; however, there has been a downturn in perceptions around organisation and teaching. The largely positive trend in perceptions of resources has continued. The lowest-scoring areas were on assessment and course organisation.

Figure 7: Trends in agreement with PTES scales, results by year

- Resources: 85%
- Information: 85%
- Teaching: 82%
- Dissertation: 79%
- Engagement: 79%
- Skills development: 78%
- Assessment: 74%
- Organisation: 73%

n=27,554 to 68,758
A more complex analysis examining only those institutions that took part in PTES across the 5 years and weighting for the 2018 response by a number of factors confirmed the slight negative shift in scores. The variation appeared to be most significant at institutional level, rather than at a student or discipline level, with clear decreases in positive perceptions for particular universities but not for others.

The cause of this dip appears to be the UCU (University and College Union) strike action over pension arrangements, which occurred in 2018 at a time when many students would be completing the PTES survey. Dividing the institutions into those where strike action occurred in 2018 and those where no strike action occurred, a clear pattern was seen across the majority of items in PTES.

The difference for the item that evidenced the strongest negative trend, “the course is well organised and is running smoothly”, is shown in Figure 8. Where institutions had experienced strike action there was an average drop in agreement with this item by 5 percentage points from 2017 to 2018. This was within a group of institutions that had previously maintained very positive perceptions of organisation. Institutions where there had been no strike action showed a minor drop in positive perceptions, which appears to follow a slight but longer-term trend.

![Figure 8: Course is well organised, by whether institution experienced strike action](image)

For around two-thirds of institutions affected by strike action, negative trends are observed in the overall teaching scale, the organisation scale, and in the overall satisfaction measure. For institutions where there was no strike action, perceptions on average were around the same or more positive than in 2017, with just half of these institutions experiencing negative trends.

This analysis shows that the strike action in 2018 explains much of the negative movement in scores between 2017 and 2018. There is a slight caveat, in as much as for some items there remain some negative trends for institutions not affected by strike action. This is covered in more detail in the following section.

---

3 Analysis in this section only includes institutions that have taken part in PTES from 2014 to 2018. See Appendix 1 for details of institutions.
5.2 Strengths and weaknesses in PGT provision

Figure 9 below shows the highest- and lowest-scoring items from the core PTES questionnaire. Even the lowest-scoring items have a majority positive response. The highest-scoring items reinforce positive perceptions of teaching, for example 89% of students agree that staff are enthusiastic about what they teach. Underscoring that students have a very positive view of learning resources, 88% of respondents agreed they had access to general IT resources when they needed them. Items on engagement in taught sessions and the provision of information to inform course choice were also very positive.

The group of lowest-scoring items indicates several areas where students are less positive. One in 6 students (16%) disagreed that they had sufficient contact time to support their learning. There were similar levels of disagreement around being involved in how the course was run, and receiving feedback promptly. Course organisation and workload also had negative perceptions from a significant number of students.

### Figure 9: Highest- and lowest-scoring items for PTES 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Staff are good at explaining things</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am encouraged to ask questions or make contributions in taught sessions</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information provided was easy to find (to help choose course)</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The workload on my course has been manageable</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course is well organised and is running smoothly</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback on my work has been prompt</td>
<td>69%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is sufficient contact time to support effective learning</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am encouraged to be involved in decisions about how my course is run</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[n=83,879\text{ to } 85,437\]
Exploring individual items (see Figure 10), some clear trends of growth and concern emerge across the sector. One of the strongest positive trends has been for the item “I am encouraged to be involved in decisions about how my course is run”, with an increase of 5 percentage points in agreement since 2014. The high levels of disagreement with this item reflect that it was introduced as an aspirational target by the sector. The positive trend is evidence that the sector is meeting this aspiration of increasing student engagement in course delivery and design. This trend is particularly evident amongst overseas students and particular subjects; however, it is positive across most cohorts.

Another item with high levels of disagreement, “feedback on my work has been prompt”, has also seen strong positive trends over the past 5 years, with an increase of 6 percentage points in agreement. This reflects the sector-wide focus on providing timely feedback to students in recent years.

The positive trend for awareness of how to access support services is encouraging given the sector’s current focus on student wellbeing. Whilst this item is general in what support the student may be thinking of, greater awareness is clearly beneficial. This positivity reflects the overall trend around resources, with all the items for resources showing increases of over 3 percentage points in the past 5 years. Access to general IT resources has shown a mixed trend from 2017 to 2018, but the positive trend for access to subject-specific resources has continued across the sector.

---

4 Trend graphs in this section are based on the 30 institutions participating in the last 5 years of PTES that did not have strike action in 2018. However, this pattern of 5-year trends also holds for the 30 similar institutions affected by strike action, confirming the extent to which these trends are sector-wide.
Whilst negative trends across institutions were less significant than positive trends (see Figure 11), small negative trends have been observed across the sector in the last 5 years. What is perhaps most concerning is that these trends have been in several items that appear central to the student experience. This includes slight falls in perceptions that "the course is well organised and is running smoothly" and "as a result of the course I feel better prepared for my future career". Given these two items are strongly correlated with overall perceptions of experience, as set out in the next chapter, it is little surprise that the item "Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course" has also shown a slight decline.

Whist the item “the workload on my course has been manageable” is not central to the student experience for many students, unmanageable workload has been raised as a serious issue facing some cohorts. Additionally, while there remains an overall negative trend from 2014 for this item, there has been a positive trend between 2017 and 2018, which could signal a change. However, given workload issues are often related to course organisation issues, the picture is not yet clear.

See the PTES 2016 report: PTES 2016: Trends in the taught postgraduate experience
6. Overall satisfaction

6.1 Overview of student satisfaction

PTES asks students about the extent to which they agree with the statement “Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course”. This question provides a simple barometer of student satisfaction and provides an ideal item with which to explore differences over time, demographics and kinds of study. The item also gives an insight into the impact other areas explored in the questionnaire have on the overall student experience.

It can be seen from Figure 12 that overall satisfaction with the quality of the course was very positive, with 80% of students either “strongly agreeing” or “agreeing” they were satisfied. Just 1 in 10 students disagreed with the statement. As Figure 12 shows, the main influence from 2017 to 2018 has been strike action, with an average fall of 3 percentage points in institutions where action occurred. However, there is a wider indication of a slight decline in overall satisfaction since 2014.

Figure 12: Overall satisfaction with the quality of the course

![Bar chart showing 80% agree, 10% neither, 10% disagree]

n=85,619

Figure 13: Overall satisfaction, by year and strike action

![Bar chart showing overall satisfaction by year and strike action]

n=16,279 to 34,636

6 Trends include only those institutions participating in all 5 years of the survey. See Appendix 1 for details.
6.2 What drives overall satisfaction?

Overall satisfaction is an important measure because it gives an impression of how well the expectations, motivations and needs of the student have been met. However, different parts of the student experience do not count equally in determining this overall impression. How much each is reflected upon can be estimated by calculating the correlation between different items or scales on the survey and the item “Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course”.

As can be seen in Figure 14, perceptions of teaching had the strongest correlation with overall satisfaction, indicating this area was most present in the respondent’s mind when reflecting on their overall experience. Several other areas were influential, though resources and dissertation markedly less so. However, many students were in an early stage of their dissertation at the time of the survey, and so would not be in a position to fully reflect on it.

![Figure 14: Correlation between scales and overall satisfaction](image)

Whilst there is considerable consistency across demographic and study factors, there are differences in what correlates to overall satisfaction between groups. Figure 15 shows the difference in correlation between items and overall satisfaction by domicile region. Support for learning and course organisation show the highest correlation with overall satisfaction across most student cohorts, including across domicile region. This may partly reflect that these are broad course-focused questions, prompting similar reflections to those the student makes when responding to the question on overall satisfaction. However, it underlines the extent to which teaching and organisation are core to the student experience.

As we move across domicile region, it should be noted that the correlation between items and overall satisfaction falls. This indicates that international students may be reflecting on aspects of their PGT experience that are not captured by the survey, or diverse expectations of study weakening the correlation. The correlation with career varies widely across domicile. For students from Africa and the EU this item is the most correlated with overall satisfaction, reflecting the importance those students place on career. By comparison, students from the UK place comparatively little weight on this item in reflecting on their overall experience. However, this
partly reflects that a much larger component of the UK cohort are students studying for personal interest, and/or are older students for whom “preparation for a future career” is less relevant.\(^7\)

### 6.3 Overall satisfaction, demographics and delivery

Perceptions of overall satisfaction vary for students across multiple demographic factors, and many of these differences are significant. Figure 16 illustrates the minimum and maximum categories for each demographic and delivery breakdown in the survey. Whether a student has thought about leaving the course shows the clearest differences in satisfaction. Just 56% of students who have thought about leaving the course are satisfied, over 30 percentage points below students who have not thought about leaving.

Turning to subject differences, students studying Art and Design have levels of agreement 6 percentage points below average, whilst those studying Veterinary Sciences are 9 percentage points above. The reason for discipline differences is usually multiple, from demographic and delivery differences, to pedagogical issues, to how students within those disciplines interpret the survey questions. For more detail on discipline scores, see the data annexe to this report.

Part-time student enrolment in PGT study declined significantly after the 2007 financial crisis, raising concerns about this area of provision. As has been seen in Section 4.1, the motivations and needs of these students are significantly different to those of full-time students. It is therefore positive that as a group they appear to be particularly satisfied with their experience. Factors around disability evidenced the strongest demographic differences in the student experience, with just 73% of those affected by mental health satisfied with their course, compared to 85% of those affected by blindness or serious visual impairment. Origin, age and ethnicity are also important factors for overall satisfaction and are explored more fully later in this report.\(^8\)

---

7 Sample used for calculating correlations is a 5-year 2014–18 PTES dataset, with sample ranging from 392,848 (full sample) to 15,106 (North America).

8 See [Deal or no deal](#) on the Art and Design experience. For more on PGT enrolment, see [Supporting postgraduate taught student transitions](#). Sample size ranges from 146 (Disability: Blind) to 69,410 (Masters).
Figure 16: Overall satisfaction – difference from average (80% agree they are satisfied), by demographics and delivery

- Considered leaving
- Art and Design
- North America
- Disabled
- Mental health
- 26–30 years old
- Not in paid work
- 11–20 hours
- Asian
- Undergraduate
- Full-time
- Face-to-face
- Taught Masters
- Part self-funded
- Degree or above
- Not fluent
- Female

- Not considered
- Veterinary Sciences
- Africa
- Not disabled
- Blind/visual impairment
- Over 55 years old
- In paid work
- More than 30 hours
- Black
- Below undergraduate
- Part-time
- Distance learner
- Postgraduate Certificate
- Externally funded
- Below undergraduate
- Fluent
- Male

Retention
Subject
Origin
Disability
Type of disability
Age
Employment
Hours in paid work
Ethnicity (UK only)
Prior qualification
Mode
Delivery
Qualification
Funding
Parental education
Gender

n=146 to 74,772
6.4 Overall satisfaction and motivation to take the course

There is some difference in overall satisfaction by motivation to take the course, with 83% of those having an academic focus being satisfied, compared to 77% of those taking a course for purely personal interest (see Figure 17). This appears to contradict the findings of Section 7.1, with older students more likely to be satisfied and to be motivated by personal interest. Analysis finds that variation by age persists within each group, such that older students motivated by personal interest alone are more satisfied than younger students motivated by personal interest, but less satisfied than similar-aged students with other motivations.

If the student’s choice of course and institution fulfilled a greater number of motivational factors, we would expect that those students would be more satisfied. In Figure 18 we see that this is indeed the case. Around 72% of students who selected 2 or 3 motivations for attending the course and institution were satisfied, compared to 91% of students who selected 8 or more motivations. This is one of the largest differences observed in the analysis. Therefore, rather than type of motivation, what appears to be more critical is the number of motivations that are met in the selection of course and institution. This reinforces the conclusion of the 2017 PTES report that where there is a better match between student, institution and course, they will be more satisfied.  

Figure 17: Overall satisfaction, by type of motivation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Motivation</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic focus</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career focus</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job focus</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>9.1%</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal interest</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=3,350 to 34,002

Figure 18: Overall satisfaction, by number of motivations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Motivations</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low</td>
<td>72%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low–medium</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High–medium</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=18,608 to 22,998

9 PTES 2017: Understanding the experiences and motivations of taught postgraduate students. The motivation measure is the sum of both motivation to select course and motivation to select institution. Low = 2 to 3, Low-medium = 4 to 5, High-medium = 6 to 7, High = over 7 motivations ticked.
7. Demographic groups in PTES

7.1 Age

One of the most striking differentials in the PTES overall satisfaction measure is the variation by age (see Figure 19). Whilst 79% of students who are under 26 years old agree that they are satisfied with the course overall, this rises to 87% for students over 55 years old. The source of this difference is difficult to establish. A number of factors co-vary with age, with older students more likely to be part-time, studying the Arts, disabled, White, from the UK, with parents educated below degree level. Some of these factors explain some variation. For example, a factor strongly associated with overall satisfaction, the likelihood of considering leaving the course, does vary by age, but this variation appears driven by differences in domicile and mode of study.

Another striking variation across age is the difference in motivation of students. In Figure 20 we see that older students are more likely to be motivated by personal interest alone and much less likely to have a general career focus. The number of motivations does not vary significantly with age, apart from students over 55, who are likely to have indicated fewer motivations in their choice of course and institution. Despite the number of motivations met being strongly correlated with satisfaction (see Section 6.4), this age group is still amongst the most satisfied.

![Figure 19: Overall Satisfaction, by age](image-url)

![Figure 20: Motivation to take this course, by age](image-url)
7.2 Domicile and origin

The domicile of the student has a significant impact on their reported overall satisfaction. Figure 21 shows satisfaction by key regions. Satisfaction ranges from 74% for students from North America to 88% for those from Africa. Some groups of students are quite distinct in their demographic and course profile. For example, students from Asia tend to be younger, full-time, face-to-face, less likely to be disabled and more likely to be studying Social Sciences than other students. However, demographic, delivery and institutional differences do not appear to explain differences in satisfaction.

Students from Africa are most likely to be studying to progress to a higher-level qualification, this being a motivation for 38% of African students compared to 29% of students from North America and 22% from the UK (see Figure 22). Students from Africa and North America tend to report a greater number of factors that have motivated them towards course and institution choice, compared to students from other regions. Given that these two groups have very different overall satisfaction, we can see that, for domicile, the amount of motivating factors a student reports is not a dominant factor in overall satisfaction.

![Figure 21: Overall satisfaction, by domicile region](image1)

![Figure 22: Motivation to study, by domicile region](image2)
As Figure 23 illustrates, there are large differences in the perceptions of North American and African students, particularly on assessment, skills development and organisation. These are very large differences across cohorts of students that are otherwise fairly alike in where they study and their course aims. Therefore, it is most likely they reflect differences in expectations and need. Students from the EU and North America are particularly negative around assessment compared to students from other regions. In particular, just 53% of North American students are satisfied with promptness of feedback, compared to 68% of students from the UK and 76% of students from Africa.

In general, despite concerns over perceptions of their course, overseas students are less likely than those from the UK to think about leaving their course (see Figure 24). However, there are considerable differences between each cohort. Of students from North America, 24% have considered leaving their course. By comparison, just 11% of students from Asia have considered leaving their course.
7.3 Ethnicity

Ethnicity has been a slightly neglected area in PTES analysis, primarily because of the need to exclude overseas students. For example, the number of Chinese students indicating that they are resident within the UK within PTES has risen dramatically over the past few years. In 2018, 24% of students of Chinese ethnicity who recorded themselves as domiciled in the UK were not fluent in English, indicating that they are likely to be overseas students. Students not fluent in the language they are taught in have been excluded from this analysis to improve accuracy. The issue particularly affects areas where students cannot be excluded through fluency, especially the Black: African cohort. For this reason, some of the analysis below has to be tentative in conclusions.

With these caveats in place, exploring ethnicity amongst UK students found significant differences in perceptions of the course overall and particular areas of the student experience, see Figure 25. Students who defined themselves as Black had the highest levels of satisfaction, with 83% agreeing they were satisfied overall with their course. Of students who described themselves as Mixed ethnicity, 78% agreed and 13% disagreed with the statement.

Students of Chinese ethnicity were most positive generally, and in particular with the statement “I am encouraged to be involved in decisions about how my course is run” compared to students of different ethnicity (see Section 5.2). Relative to other groups, Chinese students were least positive about the statement “I am encouraged to ask questions or make contributions in taught sessions”, though 86% still agreed with this statement.

Students of Black ethnicity were most positive relative to other groups on the item “my confidence to be innovative or creative has developed during my course”, with levels of agreement at 80%. Students who identify as Black: African have similar high levels of positive perceptions as Chinese students. By comparison, students identifying as Black: Caribbean or another Black background have similar perceptions to students identifying as White. However, responses to “assessment arrangements and marking have been fair” were negative for both Black: African and Black: Caribbean students, along with those of Mixed ethnicity.

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**Figure 25: Overall satisfaction, by ethnicity (UK only)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neither</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

n=2,648 to 44,977

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10 Whilst institutions can upload institutionally held data for student domicile, not all do so, as this process is quite technical. This process along with question wording will be reviewed for PTES 2019.

11 Where overall ethnicity is cited in this section, only 2018 results have been used. For more detailed analysis, a 5-year 2014–18 dataset has been used to better understand perceptions of smaller groups.
Students who described themselves as of Asian ethnicity had the lowest levels of satisfaction, with just 77% of students agreeing that they were satisfied with their course and 12% disagreeing with the statement. Whilst Asian students were generally the least positive, along with Mixed ethnicity students, they were relatively positive about the statement "My ability to communicate information effectively to diverse audiences has developed during my course". The item gaining least positive response for Asian students, relative to students of different ethnicities, was "The workload on my course has been manageable". This finding echoes that in the PRES 2018 report, which similarly found lower levels of satisfaction in students of Asian ethnicity.12

Whilst students describing themselves as Asian have a different demographic, study and institutional profile to White students, these differences do not explain the differences in perceptions. Examining the 2014–2018 PTES dataset, students describing themselves as Asian: Bangladeshi are least positive out of Asian ethnicity subgroups, with 76% stating they are satisfied. However, students describing themselves as Asian: Indian or Asian: Pakistani still have relatively negative perceptions compared to the majority ethnic group. Another notable result from analysis of the wider PTES dataset is the satisfaction of students identifying themselves as Mixed or other ethnic backgrounds. For students describing themselves as White: Gypsy or Traveller, 75% agreed that they were satisfied with their course, the lowest of any ethnic group. However, this cohort is very small, with just 92 students surveyed over the last 5 years of PTES, and there is a 7% chance this difference from average is random. However, for several other subgroups the differences are highly significant. Along with the findings for Asian students, this raises questions about whether institutions are failing to meet the expectations, needs and/or aims of some groups taking studies at taught postgraduate level.

### 7.4 Retention and demographic grouping

After consultation, the retention question for PTES 2018 was changed to remove whether the student was considering suspending their course and focus only on whether they had considered leaving. The results have remained very similar, despite this narrowing of the definition.

As noted in Section 6.3, whether a student has considered leaving the course is the most significant predictor of overall satisfaction. Or perhaps we might better say: if a student is dissatisfied with their course, they are more likely to leave. Reasons for dissatisfaction may be diverse, from too great a workload given other pressures, to the course not being as expected. Overall, 22% of students considered leaving their course. As can be seen from Figure 26, students who are disabled are most at risk of leaving the course, and most particularly students with a mental health disability, 50% of whom have considered leaving. The results echo those for research postgraduates found in analysis of the PTES 2018 survey. As the 2017 PTES report notes, these differences “highlight the need for continued support for students with disabilities”.13

Across subjects there is a wide range in the proportion of students likely to leave the course, from Finance and Accounting with just 12% considering leaving the course, to 30% of Art and Design students. There will be multiple causes for these differences, though some will be due to demographic and delivery differences. As noted in Section 7.2, likelihood of thinking about leaving the course varies widely across domicile. Being in paid work is also a risk factor, with this probably related to pressure on time from external factors making students more likely to consider leaving their course.

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12 PRES 2018: Varying perspectives on the PGR experience

13 PTES 2017: Understanding the experiences and motivations of taught postgraduate students
Figure 26: Thought about leaving – difference from average (22% considered leaving), by demographics and delivery

- **Disability**: Not disabled vs. Disabled
- **Type of disability**: Blind/visual impairment vs. Mental health
- **Subject**: Finance and Accounting vs. Art and Design
- **Origin**: Asia vs. UK
- **Ethnicity (UK only)**: Chinese vs. Mixed
- **Fluency**: Fluent vs. Not fluent
- **Funding**: Self-funded vs. Face-to-face
- **Employment**: Not in paid work vs. In paid work
- **Hours in paid work**: More than 30 hours, 21–30 hours
- **Mode**: Full-time vs. Part-time
- **Age**: 25 years old or younger vs. 51–55 years old
- **Prior qualification**: Below undergraduate vs. No academic qualifications
- **Parental education**: Degree or above vs. Below undergraduate
- **Gender**: Male vs. Female
- **Delivery**: Face-to-face vs. Distance learner
- **Qualification**: Taught Masters vs. Postgraduate Certificate

n=139 to 65,860
8. Conclusions

The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey is increasingly embedded in institutional feedback mechanisms, quality processes, and the provision of information for prospective students. At the sector level, the survey continues to collect valuable data from across UK institutions on the postgraduate taught experience. The accumulation of data across years of the survey has enabled more fine-grained analysis, delving beneath overall findings to explore the varied and diverse picture that is postgraduate taught education. The findings for this year present key challenges to the sector going forward:

- The increasing satisfaction with resources contrasts with declining perceptions of organisation, with the latter far more impactful on the student experience;

- Teaching remains by far the most influential factor in the student experience, making it critical that institutions effectively manage and meet expectations around factors such as contact time with teaching staff and the support students receive in their learning;

- The PGT cohort is highly diverse, which presents a challenge for any system of mass education, yet this report shows that support resources may reasonably be targeted at certain cohorts most clearly at risk;

- The fit of student motivations to their institution and course is critical, which appears to not be an issue of information provision given the high levels of satisfaction in that area, but a wider issue of how students with relatively few motivations or constrained options can be best engaged with their learning experience.

Whilst these are clear challenges from a diverse PGT cohort, the results also indicate a huge variation between institutions. This implies that implementing best practice across the sector will help institutions meet these challenges and further strengthen UK postgraduate taught education.
9. Appendix

9.1 Institutions taking part in PTES 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aberystwyth University</th>
<th>Newcastle University</th>
<th>University of Edinburgh</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anglia Ruskin University</td>
<td>Norwich University of the Arts</td>
<td>University of Exeter</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aston University</td>
<td>Nottingham Trent University</td>
<td>University of Gloucestershire</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Oxford Brookes</td>
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<td>Bedfordshire University</td>
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<td>University of Hertfordshire</td>
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<td>Queen Mary, University of London</td>
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<td>Birmingham City University</td>
<td>Queen's University Belfast</td>
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<tr>
<td>Buckinghamshire New University</td>
<td>Royal Central School of Speech</td>
<td>University of Leeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canterbury Christ Church University</td>
<td>and Drama</td>
<td>University of Leicester</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cardiff Metropolitan University</td>
<td>Royal Holloway, University of</td>
<td>University of Middlesex</td>
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<td>Cardiff University</td>
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<td>Royal Northern College of Music</td>
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<td>University of St Mark and St John</td>
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</table>

Institutions in bold are included in the 5-year PTES 2014–2018 dataset.