

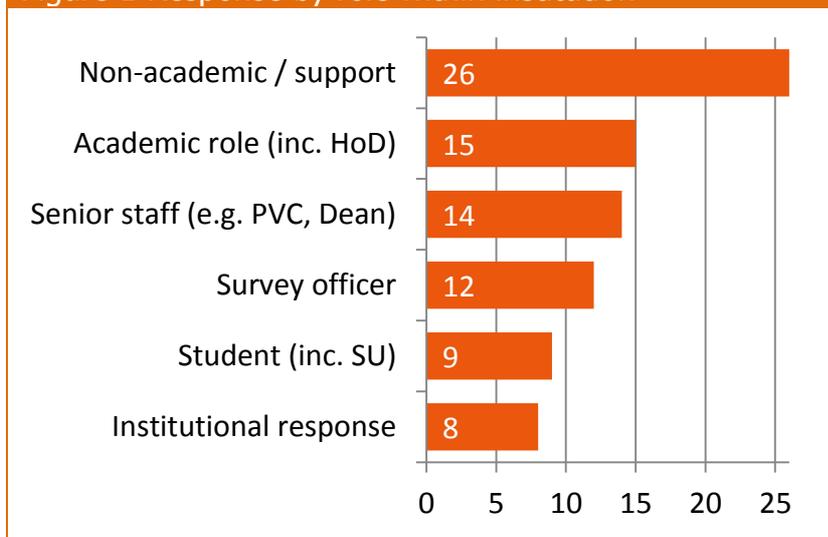
Background

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey has been running since 2007. The survey was redesigned in 2013 to be more coherent, relevant, and shorter. Following feedback from the sector, a consultation was launched to ensure that the survey remains relevant to the needs of the sector.

Response

There were 84 valid responses received, some of these from within the same institution. This compares fairly well with the 131 institutions that participated in PRES across 2013 and 2015. Of those who responded, 45% were in a non-academic or support role (for example planning, marketing, the survey officer). There were 15 responses from staff in academic roles, and 14 responses from senior staff. In addition, there were nine responses from student or student representatives (typically a students' union response) and six institutional responses.

Figure 1 Response by role within institution



Publication of scores

- Publication of mission group averages and quartile information was broadly supported, 62% in favour, with uses for marketing and benchmarking.
- Concerns around whether results would be sufficiently nuanced and whether results for groups of institutions would be meaningful.
- The views on publication of selected institutional results were mixed with support from student representatives and half of senior staff. There was little support from staff in academic roles.
- Concerns were around: gaming of results for better league table positions; lack of nuance in summarised figures; and, loss of focus on enhancement.
- Some respondents favour complete transparency, with detailed results being more useful for applicants than summarised scores.
- Responses suggest around a quarter of institutions may raise concerns at a senior level if publication went ahead, with further discussion and actions needed to prevent a loss of uptake.
- It is recommended that group averages and quartiles are published.
- Rather than rely on mission groups, it is recommended that the Surveys Team explore defining groups based on commonality between institutions.

Survey timing

- Options to move to a flexible survey window were broadly supported, with 63% of respondents in favour.
- Institutions have different wants and needs regarding the timing of PRES, particularly in regard to the potential to run as a yearly survey.
- Recommended that benchmarking will be made as timely as possible, through BOS, institutional reports, and the Reporting Portal;
- Recommended that the Surveys Team explore 2-yearly benchmarking for PRES, and greater optionality for PRES, with further consultation as is needed.
- Recommended that PRES is run annually from 2017;
- Recommended that PRES runs on a flexible survey window, with the same start date as UKES and PTES, but that the end date remains the same to permit earlier reporting;
- Recommended that the PRES survey window remains under consideration.

Additional module development

- The development of a module focussing on the experience of doctoral training and relevance to career was supported, 67% in favour, with a strong view it should be optional and pre-populated.
- There were concerns that the proposals as they stand were not sufficiently concrete to give informed feedback upon.
- There were concerns that any additional content should not unduly increase the length and complexity of PRES.
- Whilst professional doctorate students are a distinct cohort, there was a need to evaluate the wider teaching experience of first-year and masters research postgraduates.
- There may be opportunities to use existing practice within the sector to direct any redesign and/or additional module.
- The development of a module focussing on the engagement of research postgraduates was broadly supported, 59% in favour, though with strong concerns around any impact upon the length and complexity of the survey.
- There was a need for more clarity on the focus of any additional engagement module, with institutional priorities including: engagement with skills and opportunities, evidencing activities closely linked with positive learning outcomes, and evidencing wellbeing.
- The 'Research Culture' section could potentially be adapted to explore engagement.
- The development of processes or questions to better understand the experience of students located at multiple sites, and particularly those within DTCs/DTPs, was supported, with 63% in favour.
- Any additional question set needed to be optional and automatically routed for respondents, though the potential for more inclusive questions across all PGRs was raised.
- The motivation for this issue was split between, on the one hand, a better understanding of the student experience on each of multiple sites of learning, and on the other hand, a better understanding of which site of learning general student feedback was referring to.

- It is recommended that evidence relating to Professional Doctorates is further explored with participating institutions.
- It is recommended that the applicability of current questions for non-standard cohorts, such as Professional Doctorates and MRes students, is assessed alongside evaluating what questions might usefully measure aspects of their experience not currently covered by PRES.
- It is recommended that measures around wellbeing and engagement, and the current 'Research Culture' section of PRES, are evaluated.
- It is recommended that options are explored to better highlight where feedback should be directed from students who experience multi-site learning.
- It is recommended that the administrative processes and reporting better reflects the presence of DTC/DTP and multi-site students

Publication of scores

Publication of quartile and mission group scores

Overall, responses were broadly supportive of the proposal for publication of quartile and mission group scores, see Figure 2. Of those who responded, 62% agreed that mission group quartile scores should be published. Those least positive were staff in an academic role, with 40% (6 out of 15) disagreeing.

Several respondents (9 of 39) thought the publication of quartile and mission group scores would drive improvement and public accountability, and otherwise be useful as a publicly available dataset. Senior staff were most positive, with 86% (12 out of 14) agreeing.

Have always been frustrated that good Post 1992 HEIs can't show they outperform the research intensives in many aspects of PRES (Senior staff)

Being able to report on, and publicise, our quartile performance against the sector and appropriate mission groups would be a very positive enhancement. (Institutional response)

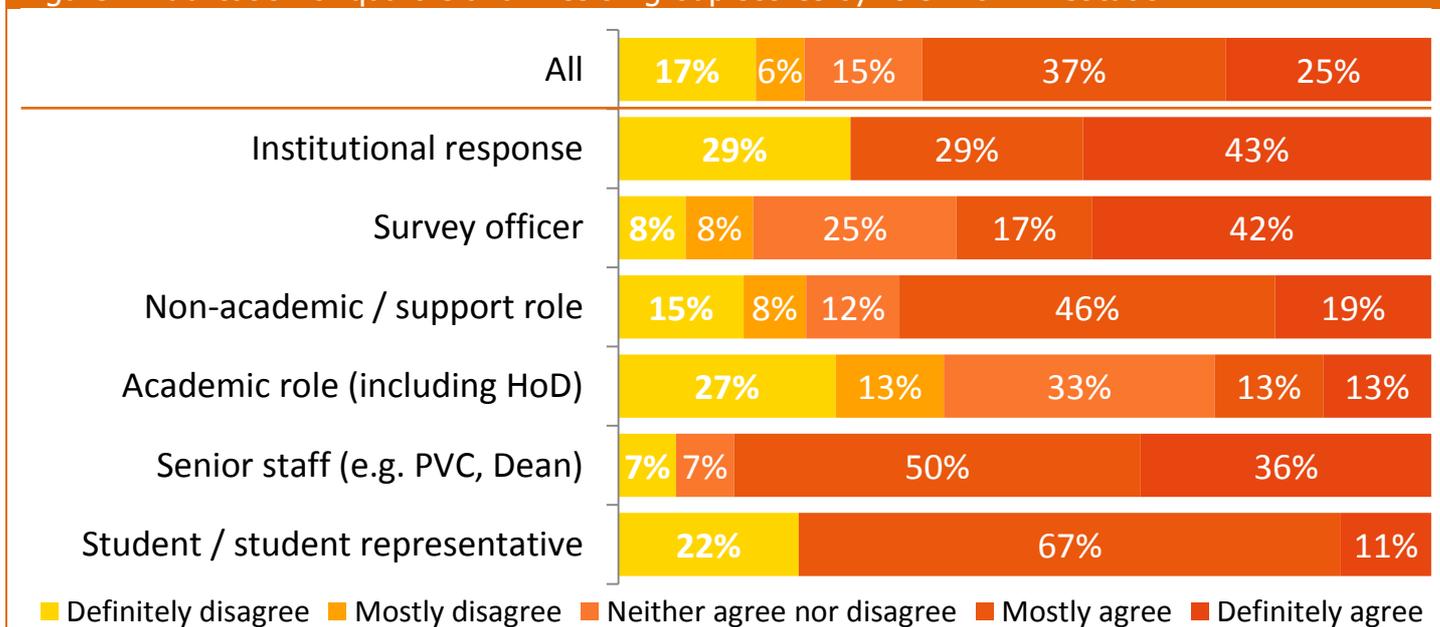
It should be noted that several staff (12 out of 39 comments) favoured publication on the basis of it being useful for internal reporting, particularly senior staff (5 out of 11). This is despite quartiles already being available internally, as was stated on the consultation form.

On the negative side, some staff (6 of 39 comments) across senior, academic, and support roles, were concerned that results would be used for league tables and would otherwise increase unhelpful competition. Related to this were concerns about the results being used in a sufficiently nuanced way (8 of 39).

There are complexities in doctoral provision both between and within the mission groups that require interpretation with the data. (Senior staff)

I don't think it is desirable for institutions to compare themselves to mission groups ... It *would* be helpful to allow institutions to compare themselves to other institutions which have similar kinds of provision (Academic role)

Figure 2 Publication of quartile and mission group scores by role within institution



Publication of institutional scores

Over a third of respondents (39%) agreed with the proposal to publish selected institutional scores. Those least positive were staff in an academic role, with 72% (10 out of 14) disagreeing. In comparison, senior staff were split 50:50, and 89% of students / student representatives agreed.

an institution's overall set of scores would not necessarily be helpful to prospective PhD students because they reflect an aggregate picture from many different students in many different departments. (Institutional response)

We value PRES as a developmental tool and this proposal has the potential to create something that feeds into league tables and leads to 'gaming' the system (Senior staff)

Concerns around nuance (15 out of 50) focused on the difference between subjects, size of graduate schools, and response rates - such that simply comparing one with another would be unfair and uninformative. There were also related concerns about: the use for league tables (17 of 50); the relatively low response rate (7 of 50); and a loss of the enhancement focus of PRES (10 of 50).

Students and student representatives were most positive about the publication of quartile and mission group scores, with 89% (8 out of 9) agreeing.

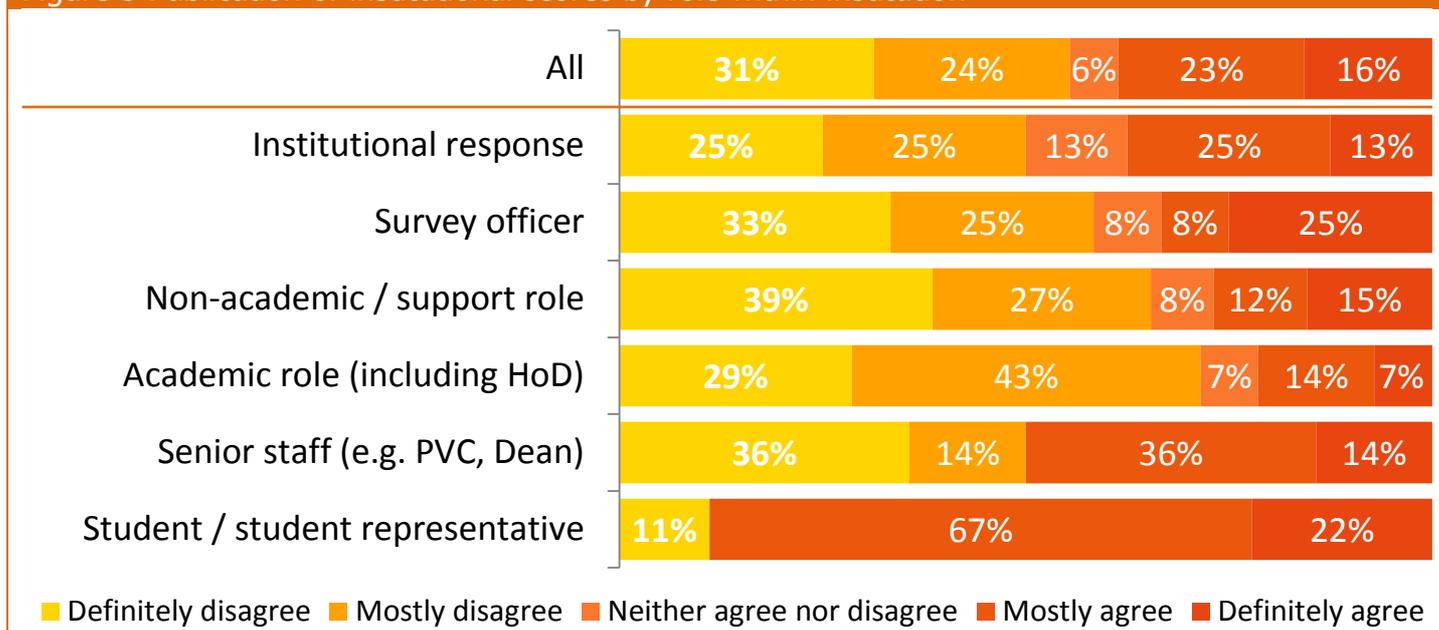
it allows students and students' unions to be better able to hold institutions to account on the PGR provision and better highlights areas for concern (Student representative)

As a high ranking institution we would be happy with this, I can imagine low ranking institutions won't be. (Senior staff)

once the results of PRES are more publicly available, the more weight it will be given ... Everyone knows what NSS is, but most Heads of School haven't heard of PRES. (Support role)

Positive comments focused on: need for transparency and accountability; usefulness for raising the profile of PGR study; and, usefulness for potential applicants.

Figure 3 Publication of institutional scores by role within institution



Proposals

It is proposed that sector and mission group quartile scores are published from PRES 2017 onwards, and that the publication of institutional scores continues to be explored.

The limited extent to which at least some mission groups usefully reflect commonalities between institutions is a valid point. It is proposed that the Surveys Team explore the construction of reporting groups defined around similarities in institutional size, cohort, strategic focus and subject balance.

Decision

The proposal was agreed by the steering group. For 2017 onwards, sector and mission group quartile scores will be published for PRES.

Survey Timing

Moving to a flexible survey window

Overall, responses were broadly positive around moving to a flexible survey window for PRES, with 63% in favour, see Figure 1. Particularly positive responses were received from senior staff, with 78% agreeing with the proposal (22 out of 28), and those on behalf of institutions, 100% (8 out of 8) agreeing with the proposal.

The main driver for a wish for more flexibility in running the survey was the opportunity for joint promotion and co-ordination with other surveys (10 out of 38 comments):

moving PRES into line with the other two surveys offered by the HEA would be advantageous. Many HEIs run a 'survey session' for all their students and having this additional flexibility would help this university as well as others. (Institutional response)

This would give us the flexibility we need to ensure that PRES is suitably placed in relation to other institutional activities. (Institutional response)

A more flexible survey window also suggested the potential for increasing response rates (8 out of 38 comments), with joint promotion and being able to appropriately time the survey. Some respondents (4 out of 38 comments) also commented that students on one year research courses and professional doctorates would have had more time to reflect upon their studies.

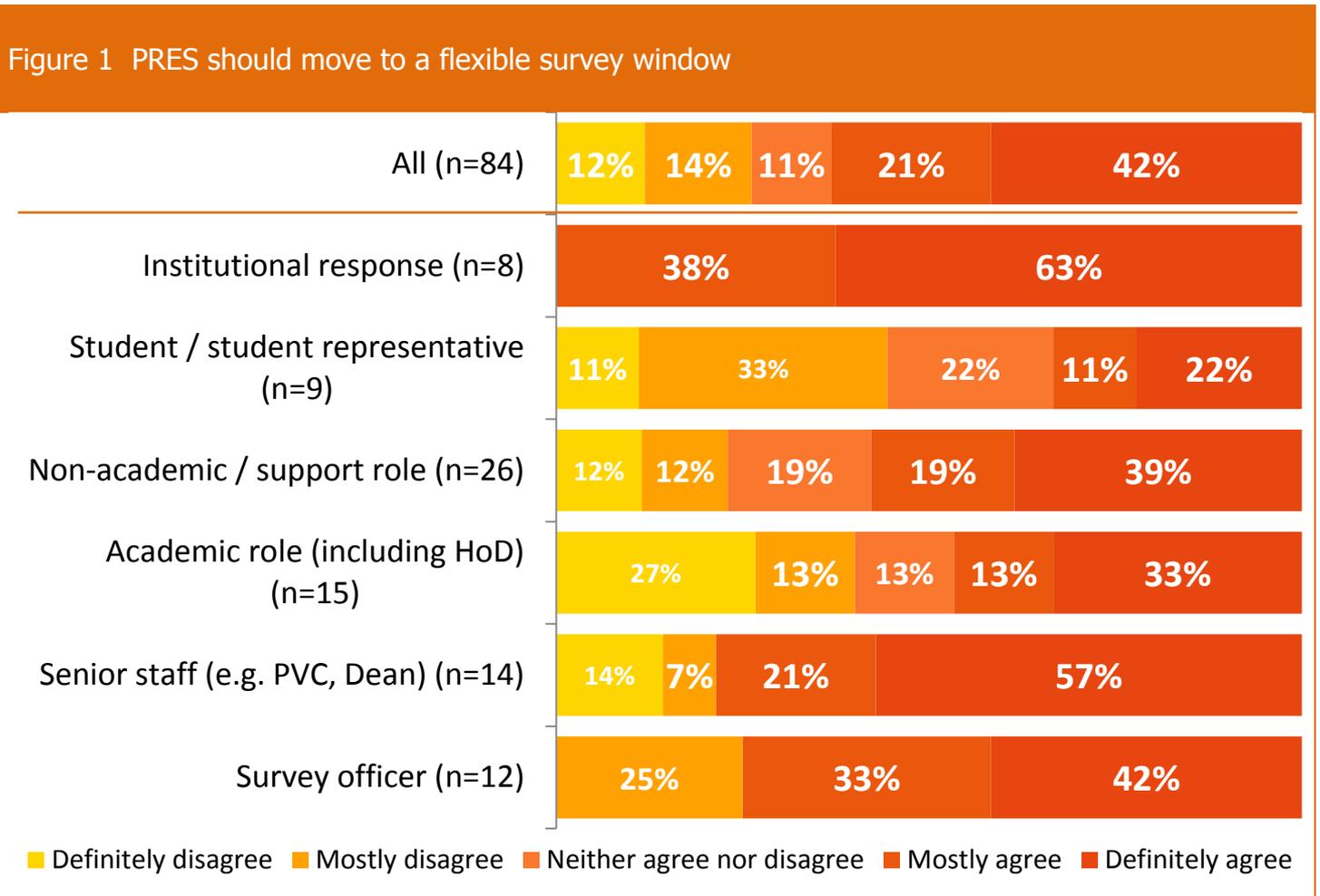
For those who had concerns over shifting to a flexible survey window, the primary concern was the availability of data. There was an evident tension between the desire for flexibility and the delay in release of benchmarking results:

There was a general agreement that the current survey window is too early for some of our students, particularly if we were looking to open the survey up to those on Professional Doctorates. The concern more centrally would be that the flexible window would mean that the data would be available later in the year for comparison and enhancement processes. (Institutional response)

I agree with the desire for flexibility in launching the survey but think that the June date for release of the figures is problematic. If we leave it too late into the year then we find it difficult

to engage with academic colleagues who are undertaking research leave during this period and/or can be consumed by examination marking. This inhibits our ability to act on results with some haste and in advance of the next academic year. (Non-academic role)

There was also concern from a couple of respondents that a shift to a different timetable would lead to more inconsistency in the results.



Running PRES yearly

The final question in PRES touched on the nature of the survey as biannual, and asked for feedback on the current running of the survey. There were views either side of the debate, this impression reinforced by informal conversations with sector representatives. The drive for running every year comes from a need for more feedback and the ability to include particular cohorts of students:

“For students studying 1-year research masters courses, this would mean we could lose a year of data. Perhaps the frequency of PRES for shorter 1 or 2 year courses should be increased, while longer courses 3-8yr should remain every 2 years?”

“PRES should be run annually. Having it only on a two year basis gives the impression to students, unintentional or otherwise, that PGR feedback is less important than UG (through the NSS & UKES) and/or PGT (through PTES). An annual survey also allows trends to be identified more clearly and means you can get fairly immediate feedback concerning events or initiatives corresponding to that particular academic year.”

Whilst there was support elsewhere for running the survey every two years, it appears that this is linked to a wish for greater flexibility in what areas are explored:

“Overall I feel that the PRES is positive and that every two years is perfectly sufficient. We will intend to run a 1st year only survey and possibly a final year survey in-between - the option of this across the board could be helpful.”

“While interesting from a research point of view, meaningful exploration of this topic would lead to an overly long survey. Perhaps a PRES engagement survey could be run separately in the non-PRES years?”

Sustaining the value of running PRES yearly may be tied to the extent to which the survey is varied to meet particular demands. The key challenges are that different institutions wish to run:

- every year for all students, with standard core questions
- every year for all students, with alternating questions
- every year for particular cohorts, with alternating questions
- every other year, with standard core questions

There are several points to note in deciding on this proposal, which relate to the use of the survey for benchmarking. First, the inclusion of only some cohorts reduces the availability of benchmarking data, as fewer students answer any single question. Second, making sets of questions optional reduces the availability of benchmarking data, as fewer students answer any single question. Finally, if only the data from a single year is included in benchmarking, there may be significantly fewer institutions included in PRES benchmarking than is currently the case, for example see Figure 2.

Figure 2 Example of institutional participation in benchmarking

	PRES 2017	PRES 2018
Institutions running every year	50	50
Institutions running biannually	25	25
Total	75	75
Total across two years	75	100

Proposals

It is proposed that PRES is shifted to the same survey window as UKES and PTES i.e. running for a minimum of three weeks between the start of February and mid-June. It is proposed that PRES is run annually from 2017.

Given a yearly cycle demands swifter enhancement cycles, HEA Surveys Team will work with BOS to ensure that institutions can broadly benchmark to standard benchmarking groups within BOS from mid-May. The Surveys Team will also work to ensure that benchmarking data are provided in a timely way after the close of the survey.

HEA Surveys team will explore benchmarking on a 2-yearly cycle within the Portal and HEA benchmarking reports, to maximise the value of benchmarking, with further consultation on this as required. It is proposed the HEA Surveys Team will explore options for greater optionality within PRES regarding core scales, again, with further consultation on this as required.

Decision

The need to enable enhancement was the priority from the survey. Given the reporting of the surveys is still being developed, and the risk this presents should results not be available in a very

timely way, it was decided to **run PRES in a flexible window from the start of February to mid-May**.

PRES will be run annually from 2017, with the same core survey across years. Work will be carried out to explore occasional 'temperature checks' of wider issues not currently covered by PRES, and core scales will be kept under review. The demographic section will be reviewed to ensure it remains fit for purpose, with a view to shortening where possible.

Other issues

There were several comments around the interpretation of the 'Research Culture' section. Given the diversity of contexts within which students study, and make links to networks outside of their learning environment, more specific questions are not recommended. Analysis of open comments to better inform institutions about how to interpret this section will be explored.

Additional module development

Development of module focussing on the experiences of doctoral training and relevance to career of PGRs

Two key developments were consulted on regarding the future development of PRES. The first was a module focusing on career relevance and doctoral training, partly to address the growing numbers of students taking professional doctorates. Overall there was agreement with this proposal, with 67% of those who responded agreeing there should be a module addressing this within PRES; see Figure 1. There was particular interest from student representatives, with 89% (8 of 9) in favour, and those in an academic role, with 79% (11 of 14) positive about the proposal.

The key area of concern was that any module focusing on the Professional Doctorate experience, or taught experience in general, should be optional (21 out of 51 comments). Several respondents (8 out of 51) referred to the ability to pre-populate so that students themselves would not be indicating their status, or whether the module was applicable:

Any participants who don't have great English ability will struggle with the nuances of the different routes and types of PGR qualifications and could be more confused than they already do with the current PRES.

It may be best if this was an optional section, or only available to those on career-centred doctoral training, as "traditional academic focus" doctoral training can have a broader career spectrum. (Academic role)

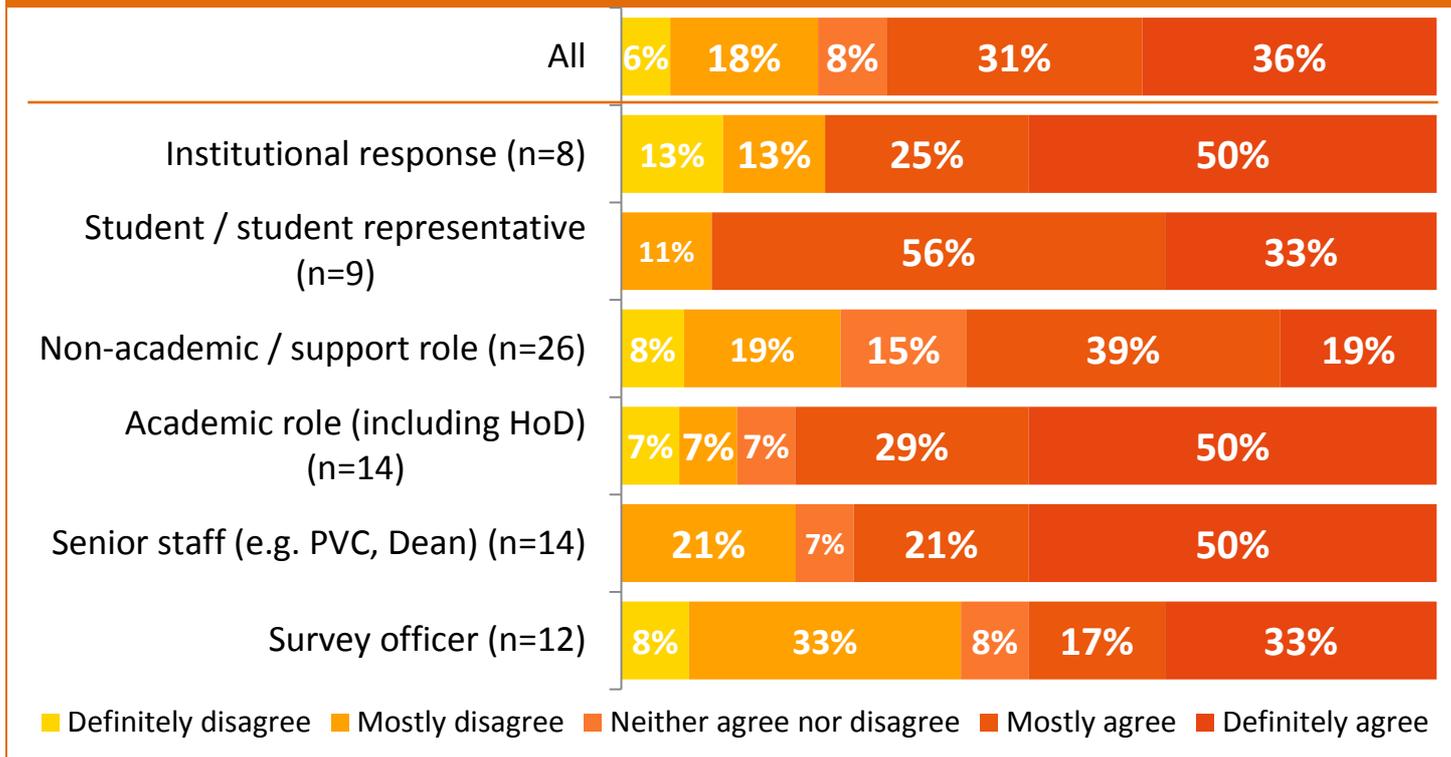
There was some uncertainty when going out to consultation with this question as to the focus on issues of career relevance and taught provision for the PGR population generally or to focus upon professional doctorate students in particular. This uncertainty was reflected to an extent in responses, with several respondents (6 out of 51) wishing to comment on more concrete proposals when available. Whilst one respondent wished to include professional doctorates within the survey without any specific module, several (10 out of 51) commented on the distinct and diverse nature of professional postgraduates:

Doctoral training is key for all students undertaking a research degree and it would therefore be useful to have questions on this aspect of their programme as part of the survey. This would suit to some extent professional doctoral students too although often the nature of their

training is different from those undertaking MPhils or PhDs by research and it would be good if this was reflected in the questions. (Senior staff)

In addition to their more structured programmes, the nature of the student profile is very different (e.g. University staff, senior professionals etc.), meaning that some of the questions are not particularly relevant to specific cohorts. (Institutional response)

Figure 1 Development of module focussing on the experiences of doctoral training and relevance to career of PGRs



The motivation for optionality and integration was partly due to concerns over length and complexity of the survey, with several comments (11 out of 51) raising this issue:

I would be happy for this to be incorporate If it didn't increase the length of the survey. A common feedback from PGRs was that the survey was already too long and onerous to complete (non-academic staff)

We feel that there are other mechanisms for assessing the experience of students on the taught elements of programmes, and that increasing the complexity of the PRES survey to include this, would not, on the basis of the information presented at this point, present over-riding reasons for its inclusion. (Senior staff)

Therefore, an optional module appears appropriate to evaluate issues relevant to professional doctorate students, such as their taught experience and career relevance. However, there are issues with this as a proposal from the evidence.

First, whilst teaching and assessment forms a centre of many professional doctorate programmes and respondents commented on a need for greater evaluation of taught provision and training (13 of 51), this applied for the wider student cohort, who typically experience very directed taught provision and training. Second, several respondents (6 out of 51) stated that the extent to which a

professional doctorate programme is orientated around career, and the purpose of the doctorate with regard to career, varied, such that uniformity could not be assumed.

There is some indication that greater use in analysis needs to be made of the distinction between different types of students, as there was not awareness that this can be done in PRES. Comments also indicated that some institutions have developed modules to survey their professional doctorate students, or a fusion of PRES and PTES. Therefore, it appears there may be templates that, with the consent of participating institutions, could be used as a basis for a professional doctorate section within PRES.

Development of module focussing on the engagement of PGRs with their study

As with the preceding proposal, the feedback around the proposal for an engagement module balanced the desire for more information regarding the PGR experience and the length of the survey. Overall, a majority were in favour, with 59% agreeing with the proposal; see Figure 2. Of student representatives, 78% (7 out of 9) were in favour, as were 64% (9 out of 14) of senior staff.

Whilst many comments were favourable to the proposal, respondents (13 out of 47 comments) raised a diverse range of aims for the engagement section, including: preventing disengagement, engagement with skills and opportunities, reflecting on self-directed learning, evidencing activities closely linked with positive learning outcomes, evidencing wellbeing and community.

The need for further clarification, and potentially more consultation, regarding the particular items being considered for inclusion was raised by several respondents (7 out of 47). It was suggested by three respondents that UKES items may be appropriate for inclusion; however, the need for careful consideration of items was raised as a concern by several respondents (10 out of 47):

The nature of engagement varies between disciplines (e.g. sciences, humanities, practice-based art and design), and between full- and part-time study. It would therefore be important to frame questions which encompass all disciplines and relevant methods. (Institutional response)

Given the apparent lack of data and conceptual development in this area, for postgraduate research, it seems premature to try to measure it. (Senior staff)

It is key that students are aware of what the terms used in surveys mean. For example, student understanding of independent learning seem to vary significantly. (Senior staff)

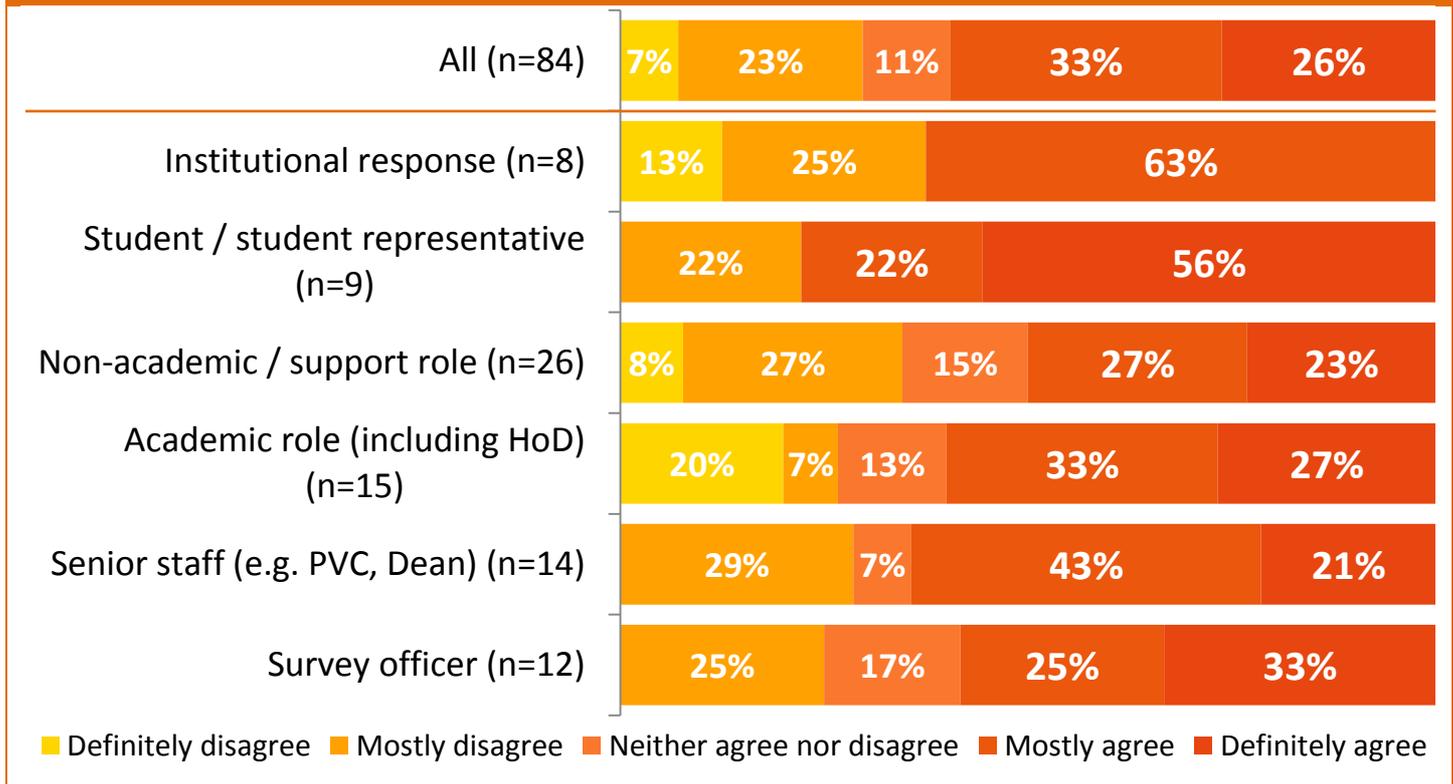
Rather than develop a standalone module, some respondents (7 out of 47) thought that existing areas of the survey could be modified or added to, in particular the "Research Culture" section. This overlaps with a significant concern around the potential increased length and complexity of the survey (12 out of 47):

We are open to exploring whether questions relating to 'staff-student engagement' could factor into the PRES as part of a new set of questions exploring student engagement with campus life, but only if the PRES is not significantly compromised by length and complexity increases. (Student representative)

Ideally, other questions currently in the PRES should be deleted to make space for the more relevant additional engagement questions. (Survey Officer)

If [the survey] gets longer still then I [would have concerns about the motivation for students to complete. (Non-academic support role)

Figure 2 PRES should contain a module investigating the engagement of PGRs with their study



PRES should enable better understanding the student experience when students experience provision across multiple institutions

This question touched on issues of both students studying at DTCs/DTPs, and those studying across multiple institutions outside of that structure. There was broad agreement with the proposal, with 63% of respondents positive about it; see Figure 3. The relatively high proportion of 'neither' responses, at 18%, perhaps reflected a lack of clarity at this stage. Those in an academic role were particularly positive about this proposal, with 74% in favour.

Regarding DTC/DTP students, several respondents (13 out of 46 comments) stated that any specific set of questions needed to be optional. Students were uncertain on whether they studied at a DTC/DTP level, as one Survey Officer commented "we don't have any DTC/DTPs but 5% of our PhD students in PRES 2015 thought they were part of a DTC/DTP." Two respondents commented on the need to pre-populate the DTC/DTP flag (which was a possibility for PRES 2015). However, one also commented that they would be interested in whether students outside DTPs/DTCs felt they were benefiting from the provision, even if not directly affiliated (reflecting a strategic push for DTC/DTP provision to be more inclusive).

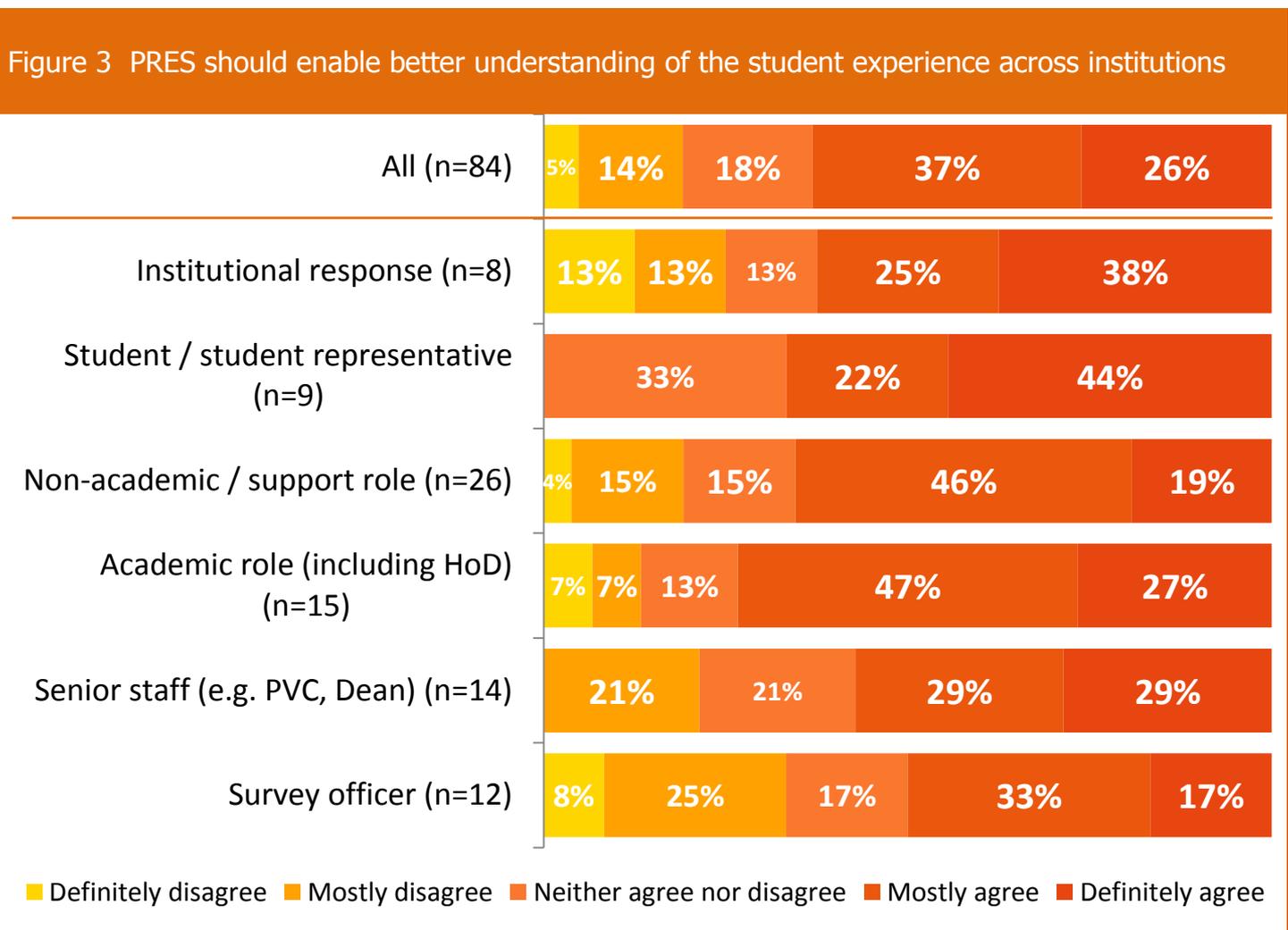
The complexity of provision led some respondents to question the ability of the survey to gain detailed data that was useful around this area. Some respondents (5 out of 46) commented that current research council processes and DTC/DTP evaluations sufficiently covered this area. However, seven respondents raised the issue of multi-site provision more generally. Several respondents (10 out of 46) argued that issues caused by multi-site provision could be at least partly addressed through co-ordination between institutions and the HEA:

The AHRC DTP model attaches students to a lead or host institution, and ensuring that these students are surveyed once should be relatively straightforward. It would be more difficult to

gather feedback relating to the provision of supervision (and other forms of support) by supervisors at second or third institutions. (Senior Staff)

This is crucial for the future of PRES; many of our DTEs cover multiple HEIs and know to which students are referring within their responses is of utmost importance. Otherwise the data is nearly meaningless. Better protocols also need to be developed between HEIs within DTEs to ensure that visiting students are not requested to complete PRES at multiple HEIs. (Institutional response)

It is useful to consider what institutions wish to understand with regard to multi-site provision. Several comments (10 out of 46) referred to a better understanding of provision and the experience of students across multiple sites. For some this appeared related to having better access to a broad comparison between DTC/DTP students and those not in centres, whilst others tended more towards gaining a greater understanding of how students at multiple sites varied across each of those sites. Conversely, some respondents (4 out of 46) referred to the need to better understand what particular feedback was referring to, when given by students located across multiple sites.



Proposals

- Rather than develop modules for PRES through a programme of cognitive testing and development, it is proposed that development focuses on working with partners and building on current best practice.
- Explore with participating institutions the distinct areas of experience that should be evidenced for professional doctorate students, and build upon current practice with regards to evaluating that experience
- Explore the potential for benchmarked measurement of the experience of teaching and assessment for particular cohorts
- Evaluate whether certain questions within PRES are currently less applicable to professional doctorate students, masters students, and first-year PhD students through quantitative analysis of PRES results
- Explore whether there exist suitable measures around wellbeing and engagement that could be used within PRES
- Evaluate the fitness-for-purpose of the 'Research Culture' section of PRES
- Explore how PRES might enable students at multi-site institutions to highlight where problematic, or exceptional, aspects of provision are occurring
- Explore with participating institutions ways of improving processes for defining which students experience provision across multiple sites, and ensuring that PRES is only delivered once to each student
- Explore improvements in the reporting of student experience located across multiple-sites, and comparisons between DTC and DTP students

Decisions

Further work will be carried out with institutional contacts around the areas of engagement, professional doctorates, and accommodating multiple site students. This will be an ongoing programme of work to develop suitable measures. This will partly depend on the developments of the survey platform scheduled to take place after 2017.

Wellbeing of PGRs was raised as an area also not covered by the survey and that is of significant concern to the sector, both within and outside the consultation. A wellbeing scale will be included in the 2017 survey as an optional measure, to explore the landscape of wellbeing across the sector.

Demographic categories will be reviewed to ensure they accommodate the Professional Doctorate cohort.