Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING

Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2017

Understanding the experiences and motivations of taught postgraduate students

Mags Bradley

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Foreword by Professor Stephanie Marshall

Institutions work extremely hard in their continuous effort to improve the academic experience of their students. It's a relentless task with no end state; improvement is always possible. The strength of PTES lies in the robust evidence it offers and through which institutions can make informed decisions about course and programme improvements. That more postgraduate taught students (PGTs) than ever before responded to the survey this year - over 84,500 - reinforces the value of that body of evidence.

The weight of numbers of PGTs responding also gives huge credibility to the survey's overarching finding: that over 82% of participants agree they are satisfied with the overall quality of their course. This is extremely encouraging for the sector and indicates that improvements to postgraduate taught courses are starting from a very high base. Those planning and delivering these programmes deserve enormous credit for their work.

Notwithstanding the very positive headline success, this report mirrors findings in recent HEA surveys which highlight the challenges faced by particular demographic groups. This is particularly notable in the retention vulnerability of students who are either disabled, older, in part-time work or from a widening participation background. The retention vulnerability of students with a mental health condition is stark, with 51% of those students reporting they have considered leaving or suspending their studies. In comparison, only 19% of students who do not classify themselves in any of these groups report similar sentiments.

The sector should be proud of its postgraduate taught offer. Equally, the findings underline just how important it is that the sector works together to intensify and accelerate initiatives to support more vulnerable student groups. PTES will continue to play a key role in gathering data and offering insights so that the sector can act, and students benefit.

Professor Stephanie Marshall

Chief Executive, Higher Education Academy

Executive Summary

Overview of results

- This report presents and discusses the national results for PTES 2017, in which 84,556 students participated.

- The results are a positive endorsement of taught postgraduate education, indicated by 82% of participants agreeing they were satisfied with the overall quality of their course.

- The results from the seven core areas of teaching and learning assessed were also extremely positive, with a slight positive trend evident since 2014.

- Information given to prospective students and access to resources were the most positive scoring areas, whereas the lowest scoring areas were assessment and course organisation.

- The highest scoring items reinforce positive perceptions of teaching and the information given to prospective students.

- The lowest scoring items indicate that both workload and insufficient contact time are issues for some students and suggest that a sizable minority of students may benefit from additional support with their studies.

- A question assessing retention vulnerability was added for the first time this year. The results found that 22% of students had considered leaving or suspending their studies.

Key relationships with overall satisfaction with course

Analysis was undertaken to identify the key relationships between overall satisfaction and the other areas of learning and teaching assessed in the questionnaire. These results provide a potential starting point for understanding what to focus on in order to enhance the student experience.

The key relationships with overall course satisfaction were found to be:

- Satisfaction with support for learning

- Satisfaction with the organisation of the course

Motivation for course choice and overall course satisfaction: The results suggest that students who were willing or able to really consider their course options prior to starting (e.g. by selecting the course on the basis of its structure or the reputation of course tutors) had more positive levels of overall course satisfaction than those that were not; in essence, it appears that the course was living up to their expectations prior to commencement. Where this choice was absent (e.g. where the institution is the only institution offering the course), overall course satisfaction was slightly lower.

Differences in student groups overall

The data was analysed by key student characteristics. It is very clear from this analysis that the taught postgraduate student experience is not homogeneous. Key differences were found between groups of students:

- **Gender differences:** the results for male and female participants were broadly similar. However, women were 4% more likely to consider leaving or suspending their course than men.

- **Permanent residence:** a consistent pattern to emerge from the results was that UK students had more positive perceptions of their learning and teaching experiences than 'other EU' students but that 'non-EU' students had more positive perceptions than UK and 'other EU' students.

- **Ethnicity:** Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) students had consistently more positive perceptions than non-BME students. This is inconsistent with work on widening participation, where BME students are found to have a less positive experience. However, this could be due to the PTES sample constituting all BME students, not just those who are UK residents only[1]. Further research examining the differences between BME students from the UK and those from outside the UK would be advantageous.

- **Disability:** the largest and most consistent differences in student perceptions were between students who disclosed they had a disability and those who did not. This was particularly so with regards to retention vulnerability, where students with a disability were 23% more likely to consider leaving or suspending their studies than students without a disability.

- **Funding:** there were some interesting similarities within certain characteristics. In particular, the lack of difference in satisfaction levels between how courses are funded (e.g. self-funded Vs externally funded).

Student differences in retention vulnerability

Analysis of the retention vulnerability question revealed several differences between student groups. These differences largely point to the difficulties associated with balancing work and study. For example: the differences between students in paid work and not in paid work; age differences; differences between part-time and full-time students, and differences between distance and face-to-face learners.

Other differences point more directly to widening participation and equality and diversity. For example, differences between students with a disability and those without, as well as differences by parental education.

Conclusion

The results for PTES 2017 were extremely positive, reinforcing the quality of postgraduate education in the UK. However, the differences in results between key student characteristics suggest that this provision is not servicing all postgraduate students equally, so higher education institutions (HEIs) need to consider their systems, structures, processes and curricula to ensure they provide equality of opportunity and experience for all. There is ongoing work in this area and rich resources to support institutions are available through organisations such as the Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) and the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

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[1] 29% of BME students were from the UK, 2% from other EU countries and 69% from outside the EU.

1.   Introduction

1.1 About PTES

The Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) is the largest sector-wide survey aimed at gaining insight from taught postgraduate students about their learning and teaching experience in the UK. It is an annual survey that has been running for nine years. The survey window for PTES is February to June and institutions can choose when they want to do it within this window.

In addition to asking students how satisfied they are with the quality of their course, PTES asks questions around seven core areas:

- Teaching and learning
- Engagement
- Assessment and feedback
- Dissertation or major project
- Organisation and management
- Resources and services
- Skills development

It also asks about students' motivations for undertaking taking their course as well as their motivations for choosing their specific institution.

In addition, PTES contains demographic questions and questions about the nature of the course, allowing powerful analysis of the results by key student and course characteristics.

For the purposes of benchmarking and trend analysis, the content of PTES remains stable. However, for the 2017 survey there were two new additions:

1. A question that assesses retention vulnerability: 'Have you considered, for any reason, leaving or suspending your study?'
2. A question on parental education: 'Did any of your parents / guardians complete a university degree course or equivalent?'

1.2 About this report

This report presents and discusses the national results for PTES 2017. It is intended to be a useful source of reference for all those that have a stake in higher education.

The main body of the report starts by examining students' motivations for undertaking their course and for choosing their particular institution. It then goes on to give a brief overview of the results for the seven core areas assessed in PTES. Following this, the report pays particular attention to the responses to two powerful questions in the survey:

1. 'Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course'

2. 'Have you considered, for any reason, leaving or suspending your study?'

Analysis was undertaken to identify the key relationships between overall satisfaction and the other areas around learning and teaching assessed in the questionnaire, providing a potential starting point for understanding what to focus on in order to enhance the student experience.

The data were also analysed according to key demographic characteristics and, as a result, the report makes important links to widening participation, equal opportunities and diversity.

In the final section, the report concludes by drawing together and discussing the key findings.
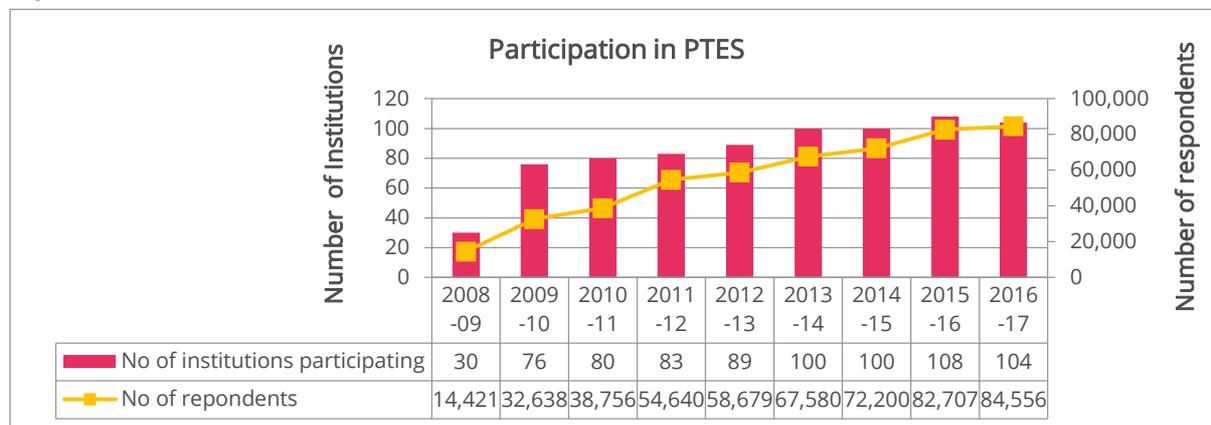
1.3 Reporting of the results

The majority of questions in PTES are on a five point Likert-scale: 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree'. Unless otherwise stated, the percentages presented in this report are the combined percentage of students that selected either 'strongly agree' or 'agree'. All Likert-scale questions are positively framed, so 'strongly agree' and 'agree' represent a positive response.

Throughout the report there are bar charts that present the results by different student characteristics. A purple box illustrates the characteristics where there is a greater than 3% difference between groups within a certain characteristic. For example, where there is a greater than 3% difference between male and female students, there is a purple box round the results for male and female students.

1.4 Participation in PTES

As can be seen from figure 1, an unprecedented 84,556 students participated in PTES in 2017, representing a 32% response rate. It is also evident that, although a slightly lower number of institutions participated in 2017 (104) than 2016 (108), participation in PTES has continued to grow year on year. Appendix 1 presents the demographic breakdown of the 2017 PTES responses and compares this to the latest HESA statistics on taught postgraduate students. It can be seen from this that the PTES sample is broadly representative of the postgraduate population.

Figure 1

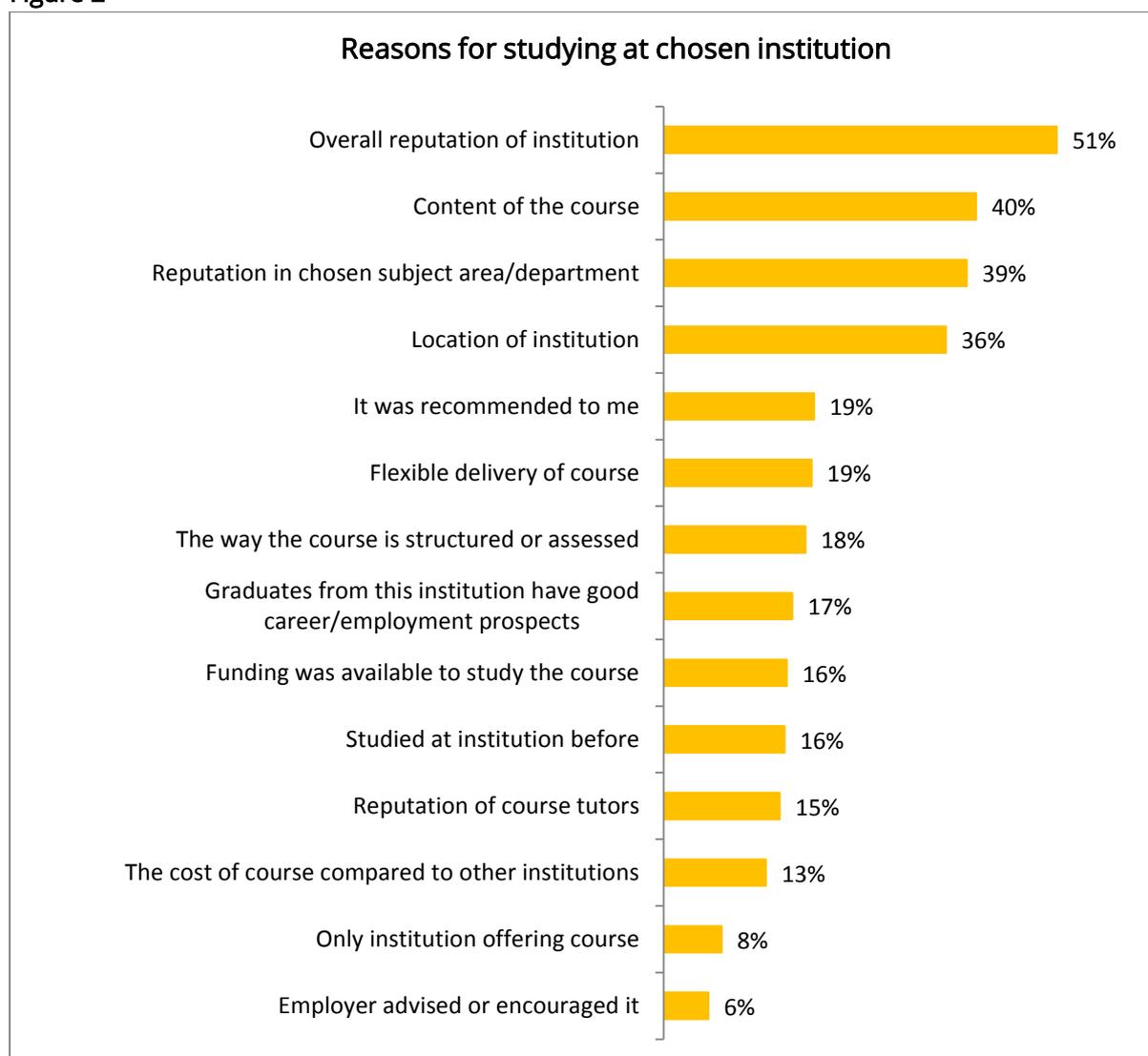|	2008 -09	2009 -10	2010 -11	2011 -12	2012 -13	2013 -14	2014 -15	2015 -16	2016 -17
No of institutions participating	30	76	80	83	89	100	100	108	104
No of repondents	14,421	32,638	38,756	54,640	58,679	67,580	72,200	82,707	84,556

2   Why do students choose their course?

2.1   Motivation for studying at particular institution

Participants in the survey were asked about their motivations for studying at their particular institution; figure 2 presents the results graphically. It can be seen from this that the overall reputation of the institution (51%) and the reputation in the chosen subject area / department (39%) were among the most popular reasons for choosing a course, as well as course content (40%). The location of the institution was also a popular motivation (36%). It is interesting to note that cost of the course compared to other institutions was a relatively low consideration (13%). Analysis of the data found that motivations for choosing a particular institution have stayed stable over recent years.
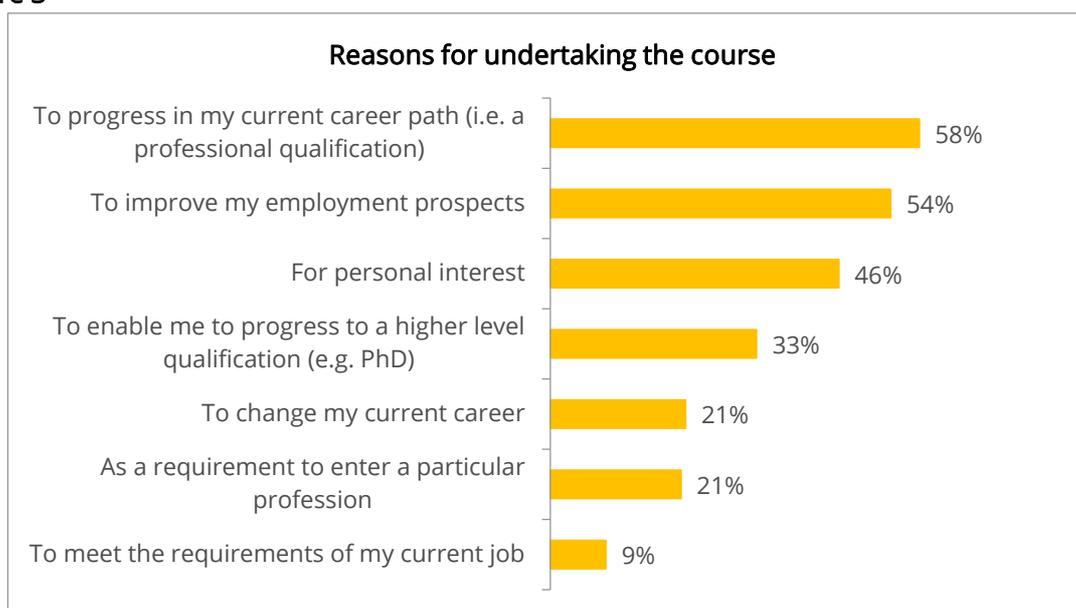
Figure 2

Reasons for studying at chosen institution

Reason	%
Overall reputation of institution	51%
Content of the course	40%
Reputation in chosen subject area/department	39%
Location of institution	36%
It was recommended to me	19%
Flexible delivery of course	19%
The way the course is structured or assessed	18%
Graduates from this institution have good career/employment prospects	17%
Funding was available to study the course	16%
Studied at institution before	16%
Reputation of course tutors	15%
The cost of course compared to other institutions	13%
Only institution offering course	8%
Employer advised or encouraged it	6%

2.2 Motivation for undertaking the course

Students were asked about their main motivation for undertaking the course; the results are illustrated in figure 3. It can be seen from this that career and employment prospects are the main reasons that people undertake their course, reinforcing the importance of postgraduate education in enhancing people's career potential. It is reassuring to see that so many students (46%) consider personal interest to be one of the main reasons for undertaking the course. As with motivations for choosing a particular institution, analysis of the data found that motivations for undertaking postgraduate courses have remained stable over time.
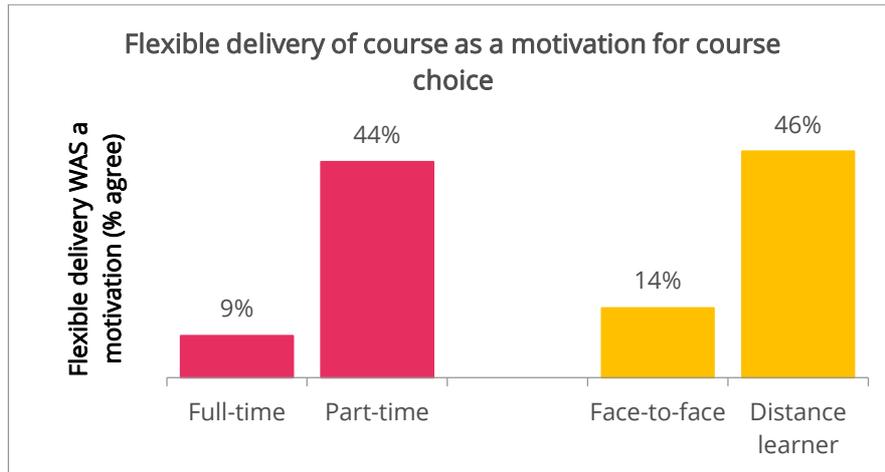
Figure 3

Reasons for undertaking the course

Reason	Percentage
To progress in my current career path (i.e. a professional qualification)	58%
To improve my employment prospects	54%
For personal interest	46%
To enable me to progress to a higher level qualification (e.g. PhD)	33%
To change my current career	21%
As a requirement to enter a particular profession	21%
To meet the requirements of my current job	9%

2.3 Motivations of different student groups

There were considerable differences between the motivations of different student groups, especially with regards to differences between full-time and part-time students, and differences between face-to-face and distance learners. For example for both part-time and distance learning students, the flexibility of the course was a much more important consideration than for full-time and face-to-face learners (see figure 4).

Figure 4

Flexible delivery of course as a motivation for course choice

Flexible delivery WAS a motivation (% agree)

- Full-time: 9%
- Part-time: 44%
- Face-to-face: 14%
- Distance learner: 46%

3. Overview of the taught postgraduate experience

3.1 Results at a glance

Figure 5 presents the results for the core areas assessed in PTES, ordered by the highest to lowest scoring areas for 2017 results.
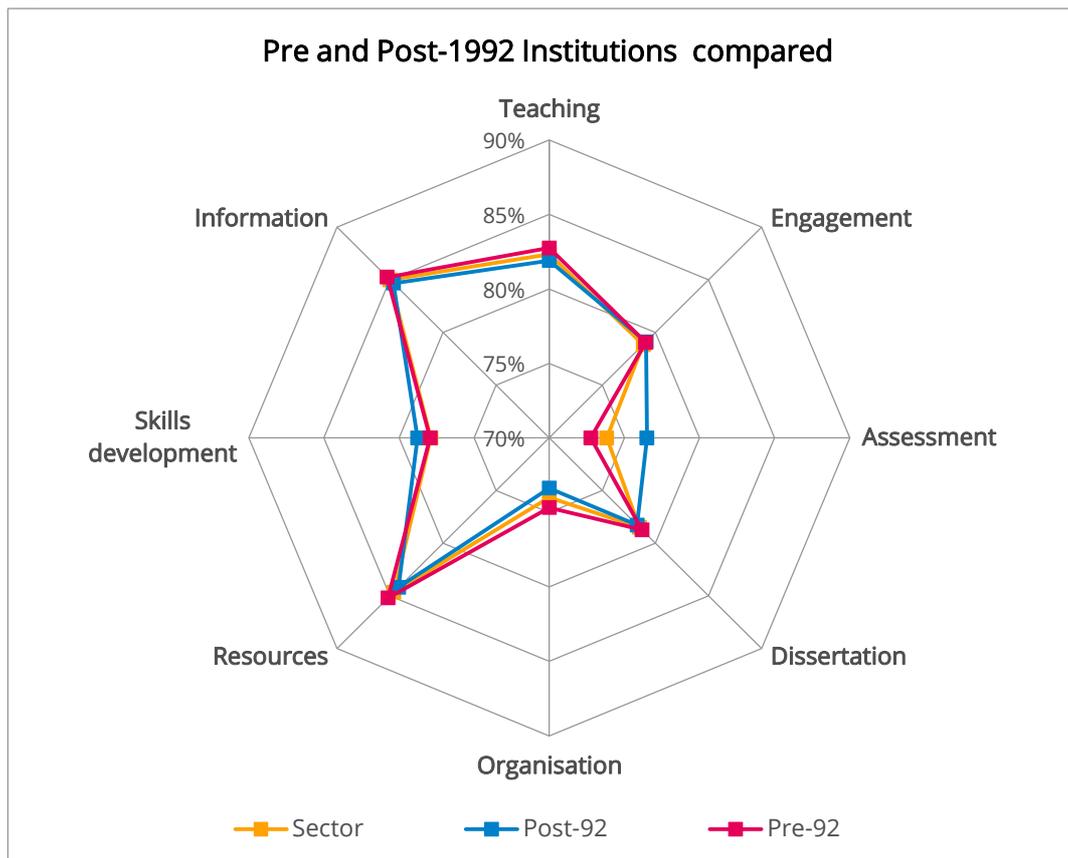
Figure 5

PTES results at a glance (aggregate % agree)
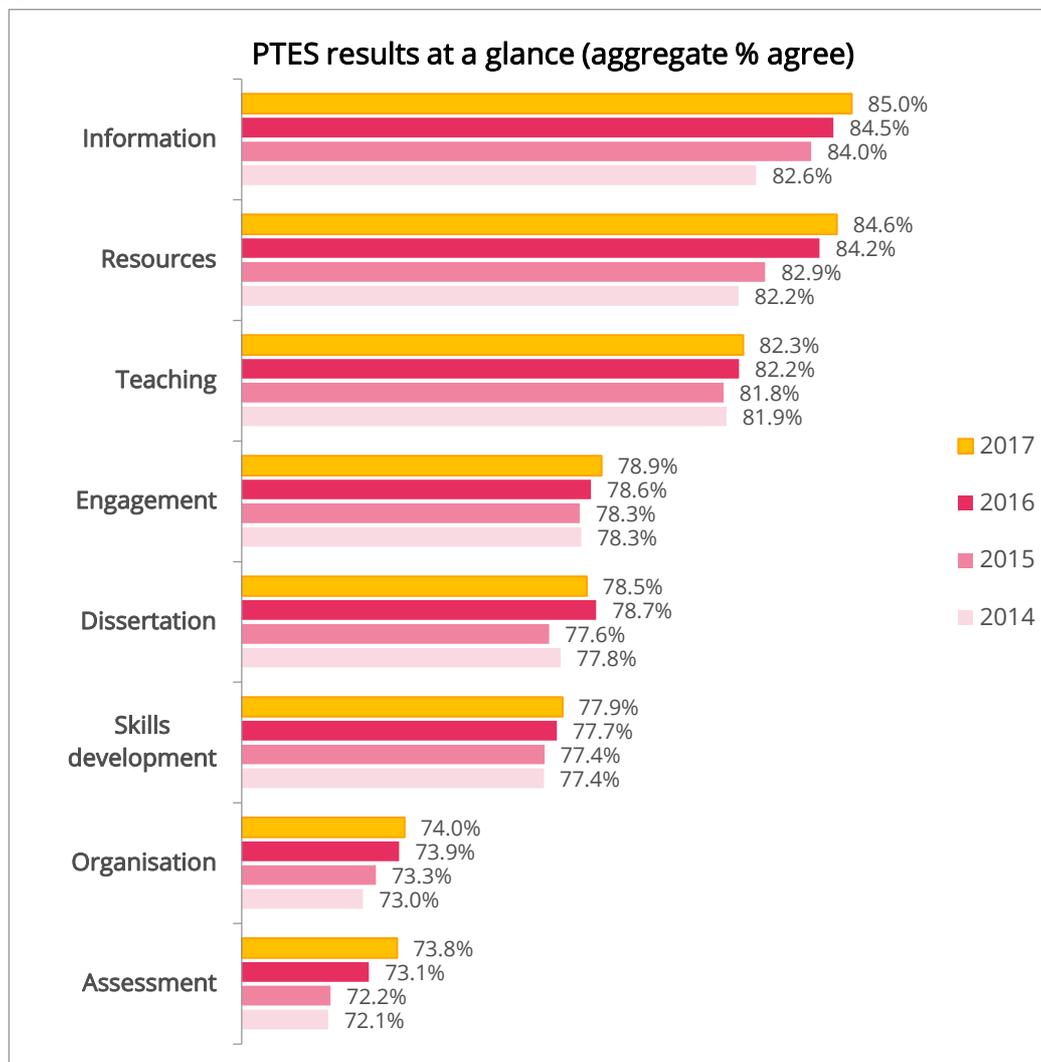
It can be seen from the above that the results were very positive and stable. There has been a slight positive trend since 2014, most noticeably around information given to prospective students and access to resources, which were also the most positive scoring areas in the questionnaire. The lowest scoring areas were assessment and course organisation.

While at first glance, information given to prospective students as the most positively scoring area in the questionnaire may appear to be quite a prosaic positive, the results on motivations for choosing a particular institution (discussed in the previous section) and the relationship between these and overall course satisfaction (discussed in section 4) show that information about the course prior to course choice is extremely important.

3.2 Comparing pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions

Analysis was undertaken to see if differences existed between the results of pre-1992 and post-1992 institutions. It can be seen from figure 6 that the results for both groups were very similar. The biggest difference was in the area of assessment, which students at post-1992 institutions rated 4% more positively than those at pre-1992 institutions.
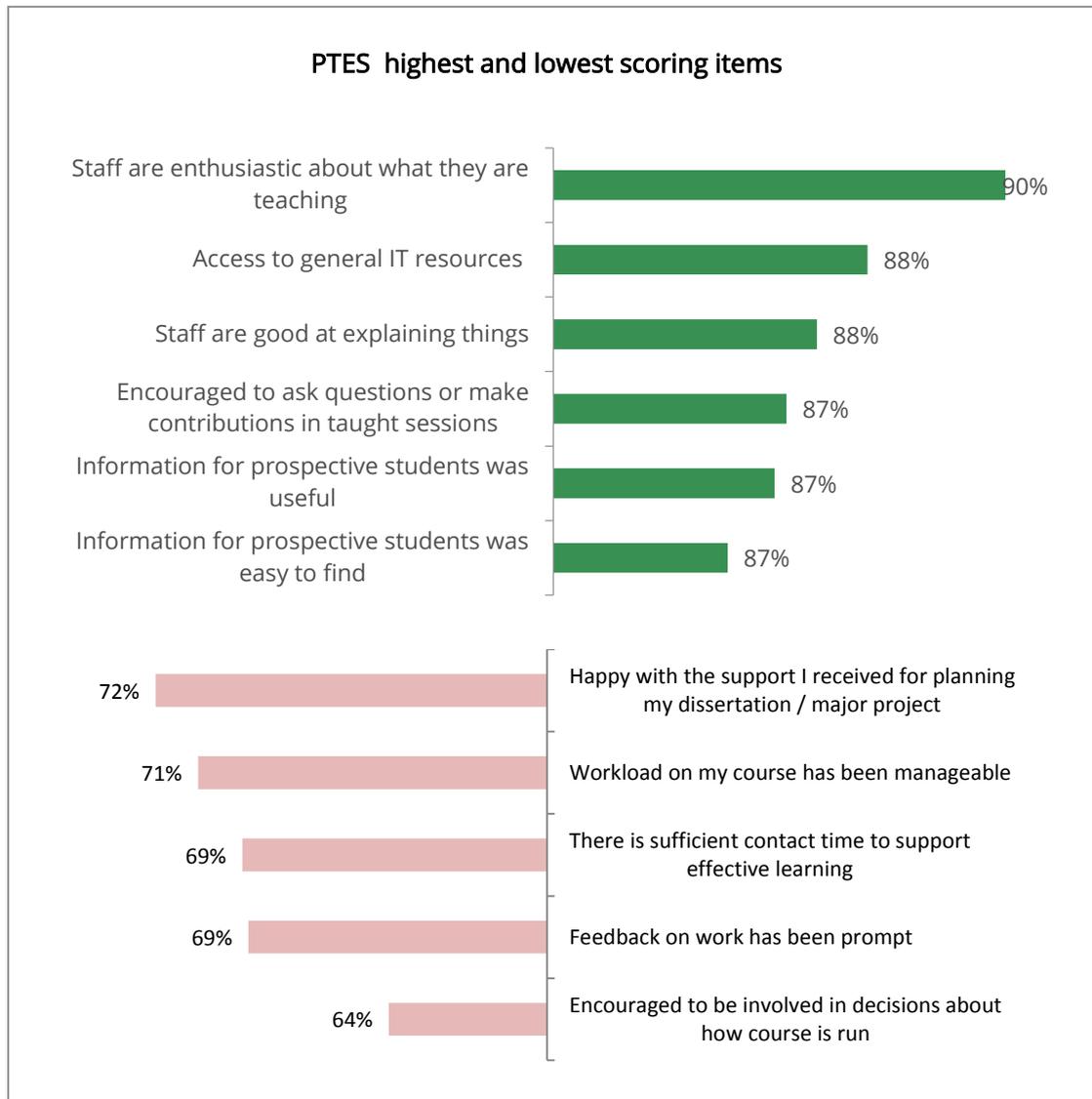
Figure 6

Pre and Post-1992 Institutions compared

3.3 Areas of strength and opportunity

Figure 7 below shows the highest and lowest scoring items from the PTES questionnaire.

Figure 7

PTES highest and lowest scoring items

It can be seen from the above that the results are extremely positive, with even the lowest scoring items still having a majority positive response. The highest scoring items reinforce positive perceptions of teaching, with: 90% of students agreeing staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching; 88% agreeing that staff are good at explaining things; and 87% of students agreeing they are encouraged to engage in their taught sessions. They also reinforce positive perceptions of the information provided for prospective students, with 87% agreeing that this was both useful and easy to find.

The group of lowest scoring items indicate that both workload and contact time are issues for some students. Closer analysis indicated that 14% of students disagreed that the workload on their course had been manageable, and 15% disagreed that there was sufficient contact time to

support learning. These results suggest there is a sizable minority of students that may benefit from more support with their studies.

The lowest scoring item was around students being encouraged to engage in decision making about the course, suggesting that more could be done to enhance student voice in how courses are run. The timeliness of assessment feedback was also an issue for some students.

4. Understanding overall student satisfaction

4.1 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 is a good starting point for looking at overall satisfaction levels, trends over time, demographic differences, as well as understanding the strength of associations between overall course satisfaction and other areas assessed in the questionnaire.
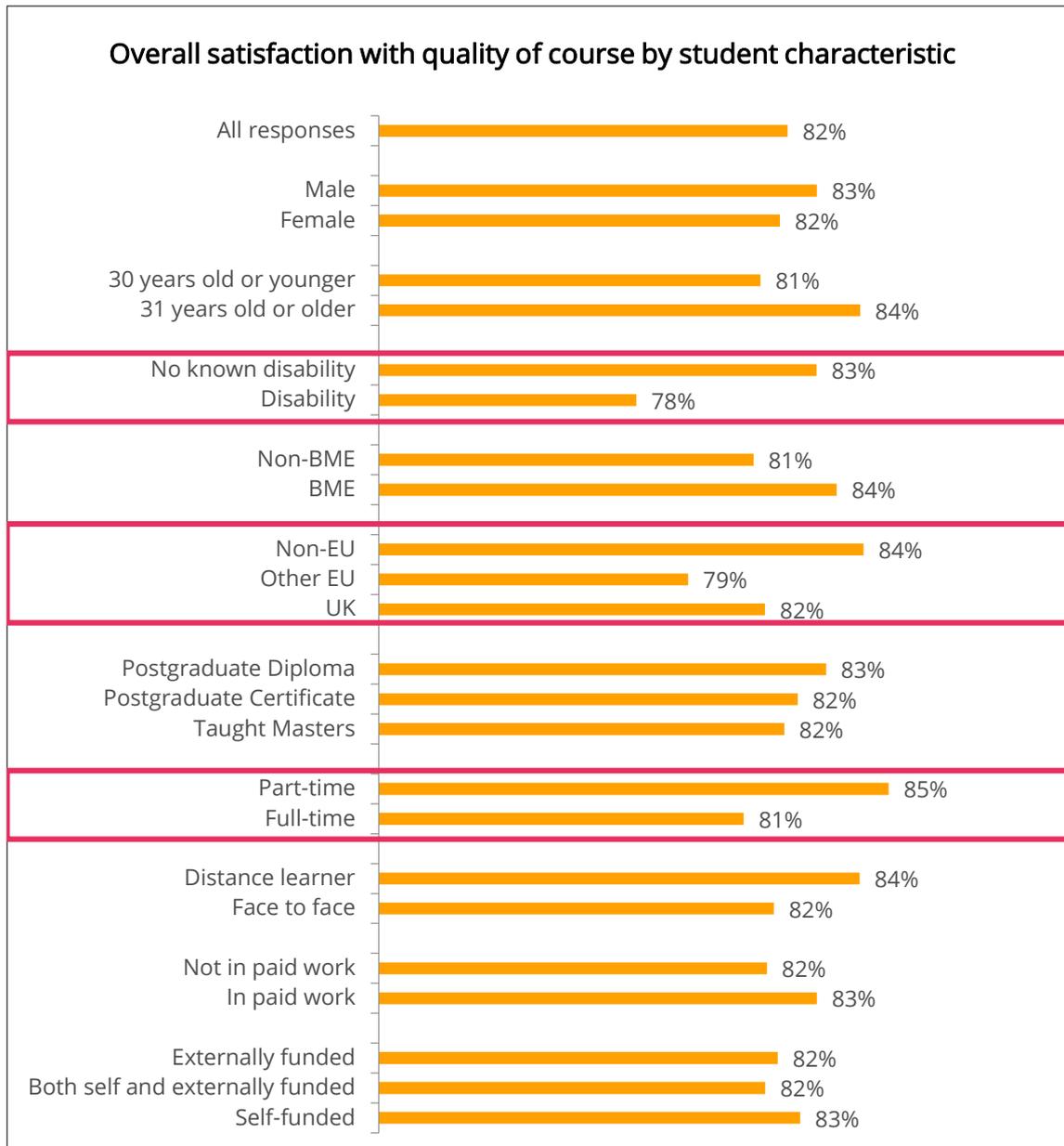
It can be seen from figure 8 that overall satisfaction with the quality of the course was extremely positive, with 82% of students either 'strongly agreeing' or 'agreeing' they were satisfied. These figures have been remarkably stable over time, as evident from figure 9.

Figure 8: Overall satisfaction with quality of course

Figure 9: Overall satisfaction trends
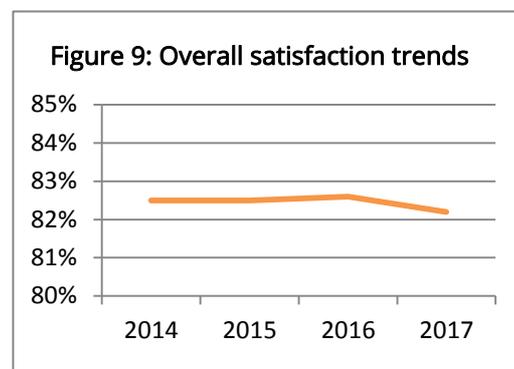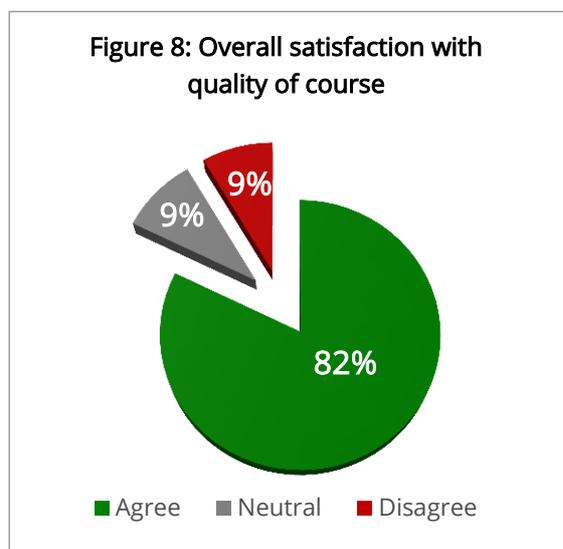
4.2 Student satisfaction by key student characteristics

Initial analysis was undertaken to identify where differences in levels of student satisfaction with quality of course exist; figure 10 illustrates the results. A purple box illustrates the characteristics where there is a greater than 3% difference between groups.

Figure 10

Overall satisfaction with quality of course by student characteristic

Characteristic	Satisfaction
All responses	82%
Male	83%
Female	82%
30 years old or younger	81%
31 years old or older	84%
No known disability	83%
Disability	78%
Non-BME	81%
BME	84%
Non-EU	84%
Other EU	79%
UK	82%
Postgraduate Diploma	83%
Postgraduate Certificate	82%
Taught Masters	82%
Part-time	85%
Full-time	81%
Distance learner	84%
Face to face	82%
Not in paid work	82%
In paid work	83%
Externally funded	82%
Both self and externally funded	82%
Self-funded	83%

It is apparent from figure 10 that there were some important between-group differences within certain student characteristics. In particular: students that were age 31 years or over were more satisfied than those that were 30 years or younger; BME students were more satisfied than non-BME students; part-time students were more satisfied than full-time; non-EU students were more satisfied than UK and other EU students, and UK students were more positive than other EU students. The largest difference was between students with a disability and students without
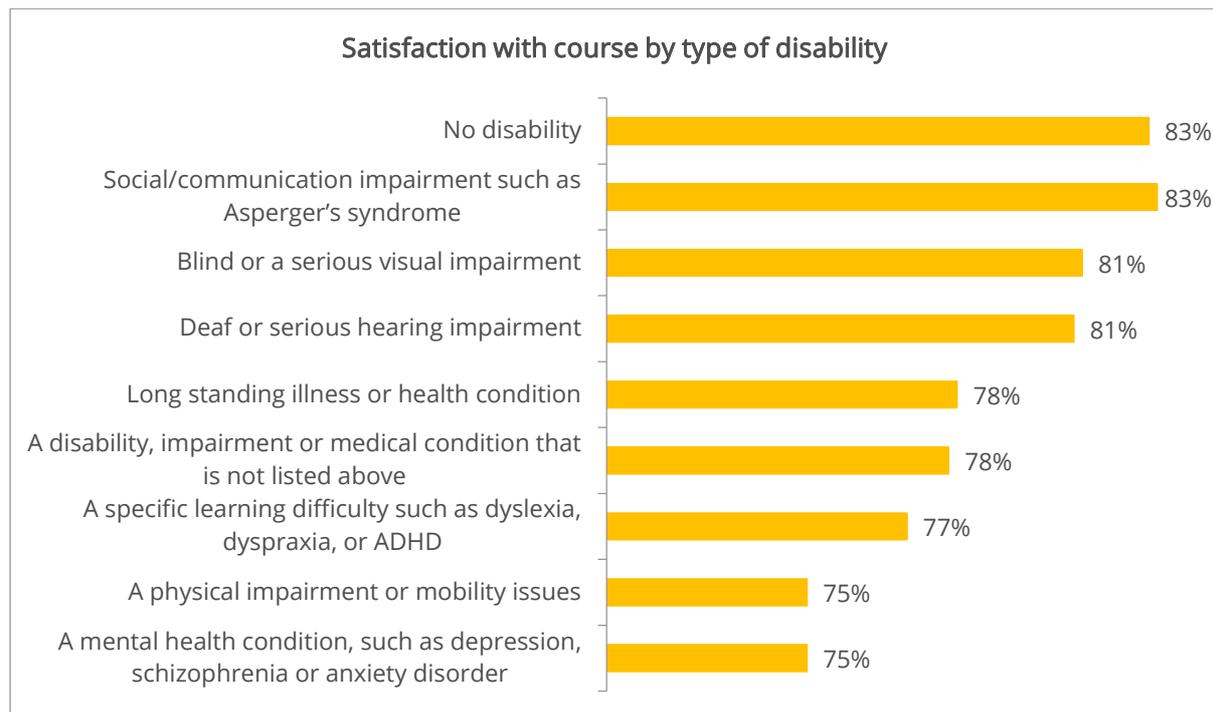
a disability, where students with a disability were 5% less satisfied than those without a disability. Further analysis by type of disability is detailed below.

Perhaps as interesting as the differences described above, are the similarities within certain characteristics. In particular, the lack of difference in satisfaction levels between how courses are funded perhaps is counterintuitive to the rhetoric that self-funded students may have an overly critical, consumerist mentality.

4.2.1 Disability and student satisfaction

As evident from above, students with a disability show 5% less satisfaction with their course than those that do not have a disability. Figure 11 illustrates satisfaction levels by type of disability. It can be seen from this that those students that declare themselves as having a physical impairment or mobility issues (n=563) and those that declare themselves as having a mental health condition (n=2995) have the lowest levels of satisfaction (75%), 8% lower than students that do not have a disability. These are interesting results, especially given the contrast in the disabilities of the two least positive groups.

Figure 11

Satisfaction with course by type of disability

Type of disability	Satisfaction
No disability	83%
Social/communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome	83%
Blind or a serious visual impairment	81%
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	81%
Long standing illness or health condition	78%
A disability, impairment or medical condition that is not listed above	78%
A specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, or ADHD	77%
A physical impairment or mobility issues	75%
A mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder	75%

4.3 Key relationships with overall course satisfaction

Correlation analysis[2] was undertaken to identify the items in PTES that had the strongest relationship with the item 'Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of the course'. These results were interesting as they provide a potential starting point for understanding what to focus on in order to enhance the student experience.

The two strongest positive relationships with overall course satisfaction were:

- 'I am happy with the support for my learning I receive from staff on my course' (.68)
- 'The course is well organised and is running smoothly' (.67)

The results for these items, including breakdowns by key characteristic, are given below.

4.3.1 Satisfaction with support for learning

As mentioned above, satisfaction with support for learning received from staff on course was the highest correlated item with overall course satisfaction. Figure 12 illustrates this relationship graphically, figure 13 illustrates the overall results for this item and figure 14 depicts the results broken down by key student characteristics.

It can be seen from figure 13 that of those who agreed they were happy with the support for learning they received on their course, 94% were satisfied with the overall quality of their course. Of those who disagreed they were happy with the support for learning they received on their course, only 28% were satisfied with the overall quality of their course.
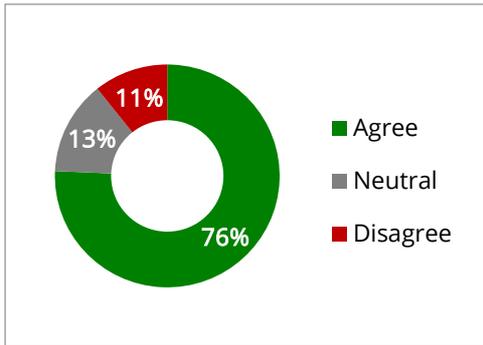
Figure 12

Relationship between support for learning on course and overall course satisfaction

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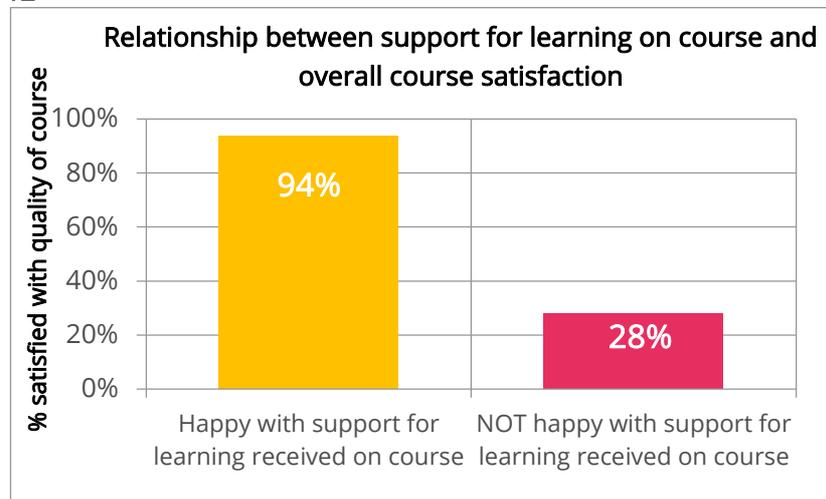
[2] Correlations are scored on a scale of -1 to 1, with 1 being the strongest possible positive relationship. Pearson's correlation analysis was undertaken.

Figure 13 Satisfaction with support for learning provided on course

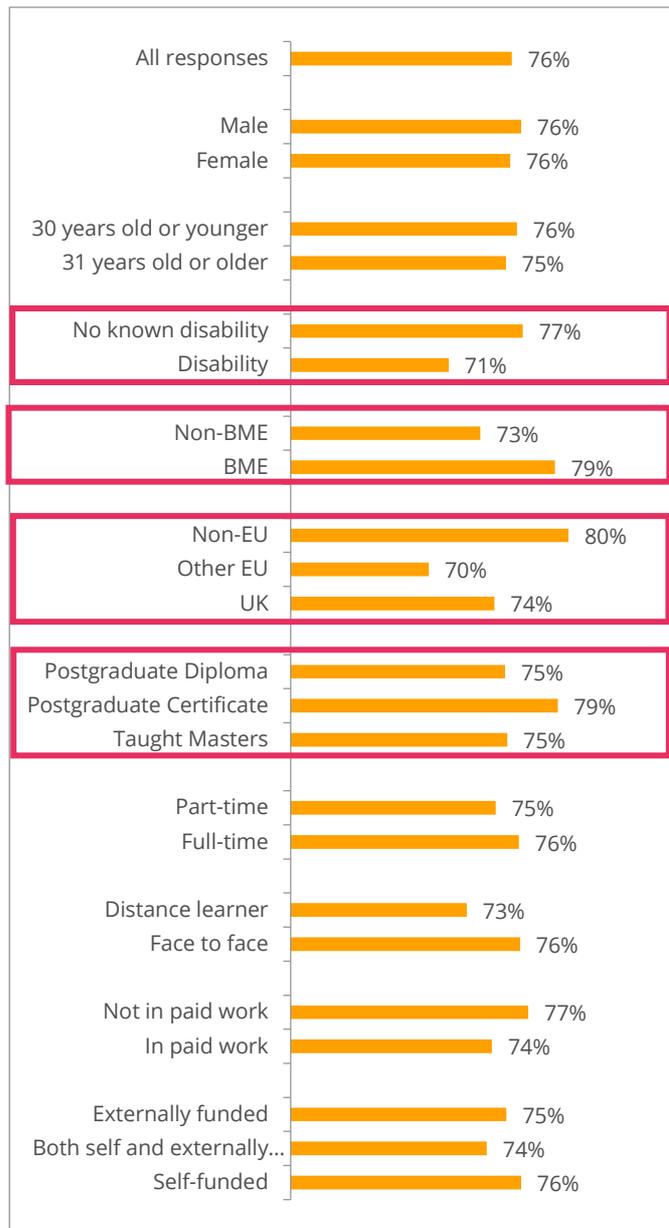**Figure 14** Satisfaction with support for learning provided on course by student characteristic

It is evident from figure 13 that, with 76% of students agreeing, satisfaction with support for learning on course is positive.

However, as with overall satisfaction with quality of course, figure 14 highlights important differences within certain student characteristics. Most noticeably:

- Students with no disability (77%) had more positive perceptions than students with a disability (71%);
- Non-EU students (80%) had considerably more positive perceptions than UK (74%) and other-EU (70%) students;
- Students from a BME background (79%) had more positive perceptions than non-BME students (73%).
- Postgraduate certificate students (79%) were more positive than postgraduate diploma and taught masters students (75%)

4.3.2 Satisfaction with course organization

As seen above, the second strongest positive correlation was the relationship between students feeling their course was well organised and running smoothly and overall satisfaction with the quality of course. Figure 15 illustrates this relationship graphically, figure 16 illustrates the overall results for this item and figure 17 depicts the results broken down by key student characteristics.

It can be seen from figure 15 that of those who agreed they were happy with the course organisation, 94% were satisfied with the overall quality of their course. Of those who disagreed they were happy with the course organisation, only 33% were satisfied with the overall quality of their course.
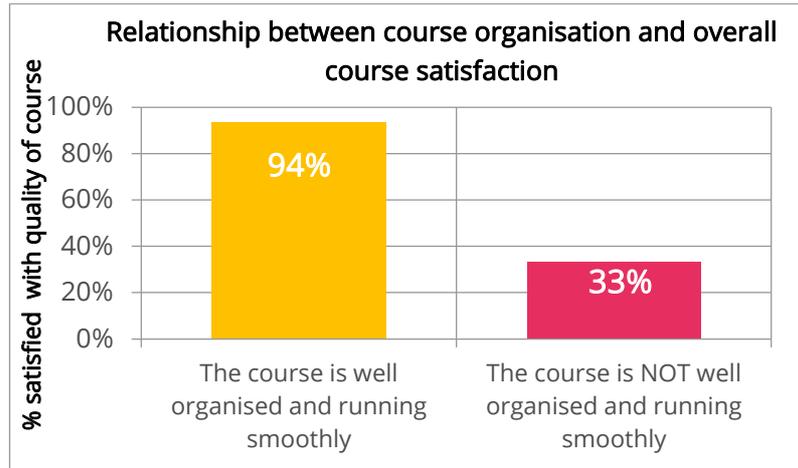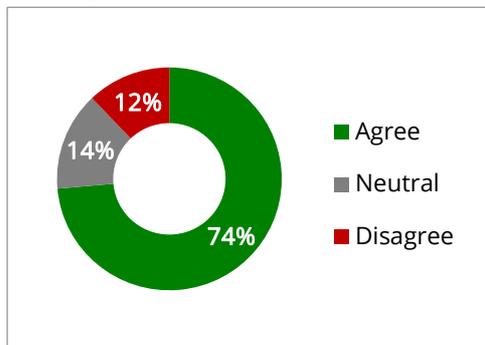
Figure 15

Relationship between course organisation and overall course satisfaction

% satisfied with quality of course

- The course is well organised and running smoothly: 94%
- The course is NOT well organised and running smoothly: 33%

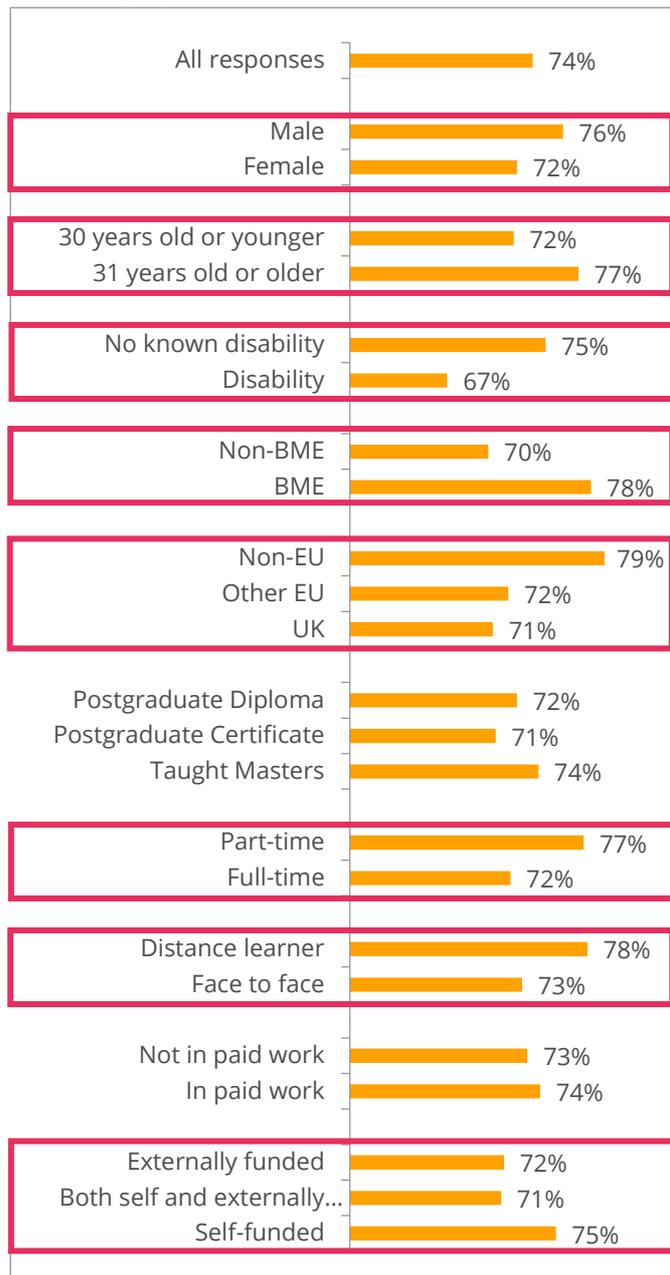**Figure 16** The course is well organised and running smoothly

- Agree: 74%
- Neutral: 14%
- Disagree: 12%

It is evident from figure 16 that 74% of students agreed that their course was well organised and running smoothly, which is positive.

As with other findings, figure 17 highlights important differences within certain student characteristics. Most noticeably:

- Students from a BME background had more positive perceptions (78%) than those from a non-BME background (70%);
- Non-EU students (79%) had considerably more positive perceptions than UK (71%) and other-EU (72%) students;
- Students with no disability (75%) had more positive perceptions than students with a disability (67%).

Figure 17 The course is well organised and running smoothly by student characteristic

Characteristic	%
All responses	74%
Male	76%
Female	72%
30 years old or younger	72%
31 years old or older	77%
No known disability	75%
Disability	67%
Non-BME	70%
BME	78%
Non-EU	79%
Other EU	72%
UK	71%
Postgraduate Diploma	72%
Postgraduate Certificate	71%
Taught Masters	74%
Part-time	77%
Full-time	72%
Distance learner	78%
Face to face	73%
Not in paid work	73%
In paid work	74%
Externally funded	72%
Both self and externally...	71%
Self-funded	75%

4.4 Relationship between overall course satisfaction and motivation for choosing course

Figure 18

Motivation for undertaking course and overall course satisfaction
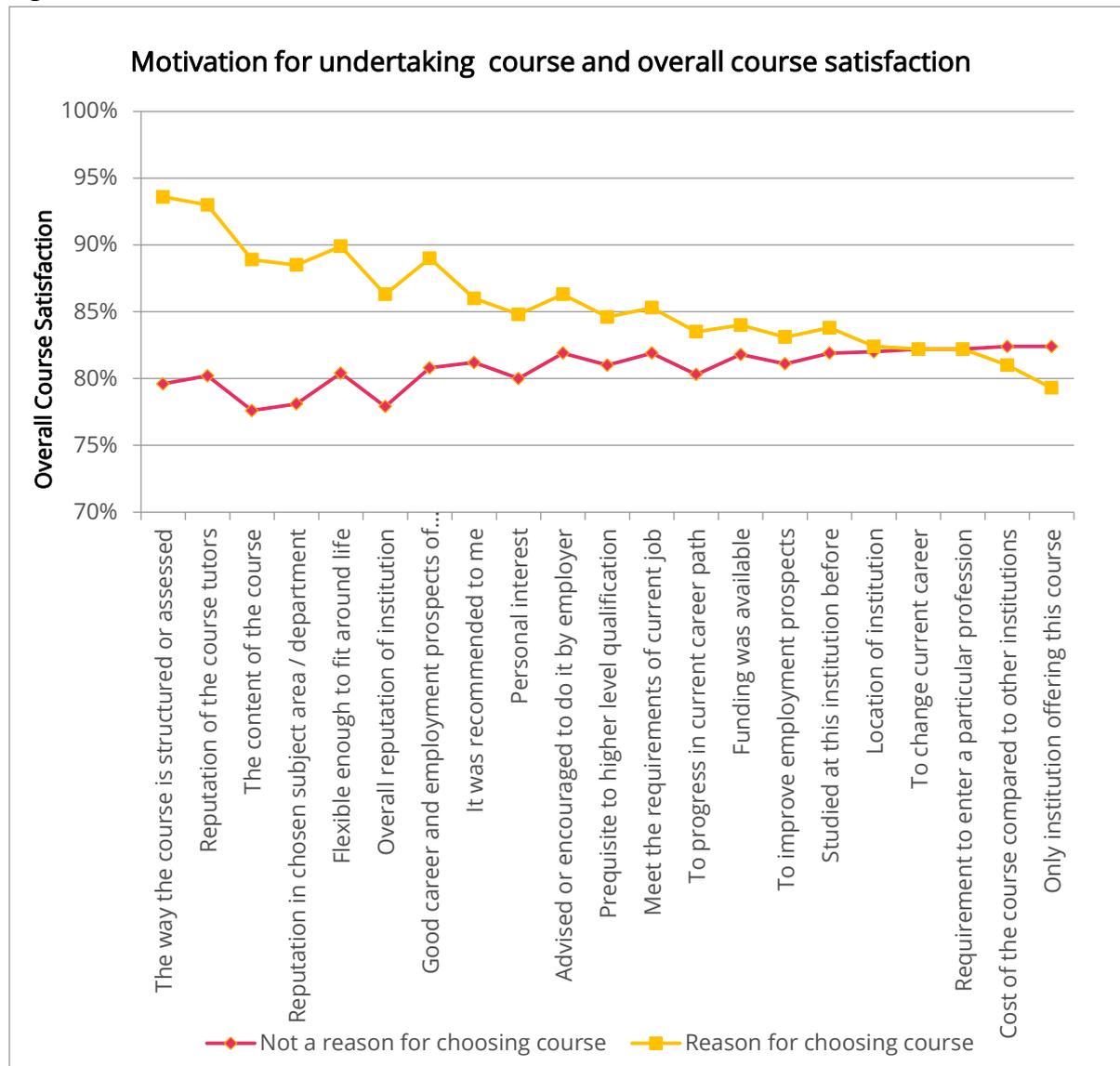
Figure 18 illustrates overall course satisfaction by student motivation for undertaking their course. The gaps between the two lines show the difference in course satisfaction between those that chose the course for a particular reason and those that did not (e.g. those that chose it for the way the course is structured or assessed (amber line) and those that did not (pink line); therefore, the larger gap between the two lines, the larger the difference in course satisfaction.

The results are interesting, demonstrating that students who were able or willing to really consider their course options prior to starting (e.g. by selecting the course on the basis of its structure or the reputation of its tutors) had more positive levels of overall course satisfaction than those who were not; in essence, *it appears the course is living up to expectations prior to commencement*. Where this choice was absent (e.g. where the institution is the only institution offering the course), overall course satisfaction was slightly lower.

5. Understanding retention vulnerability

5.1 Overview of retention vulnerability

An additional question was added to PTES this year that asked about whether or not students had considered leaving or suspending their course for any reason. While this does not measure retention per se, it does provide useful information on possible retention vulnerabilities between student characteristics.

Of those that gave a definite answer (96% of the sample), rather than prefer not to say, it can be seen from figure 19 that 22% of students had considered leaving or suspending their course, whereas 78% had not. Figure 20 illustrates the results of additional analysis undertaken to identify where there are differences according to key student characteristics.

Figure 19: Have you considered leaving or suspending your course?

- 22% Yes
- 78% No

Figure 20: % of Students that have considered leaving or suspending their studies

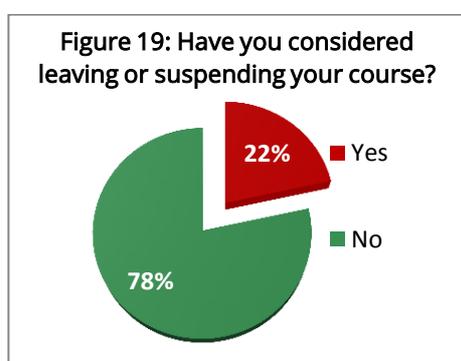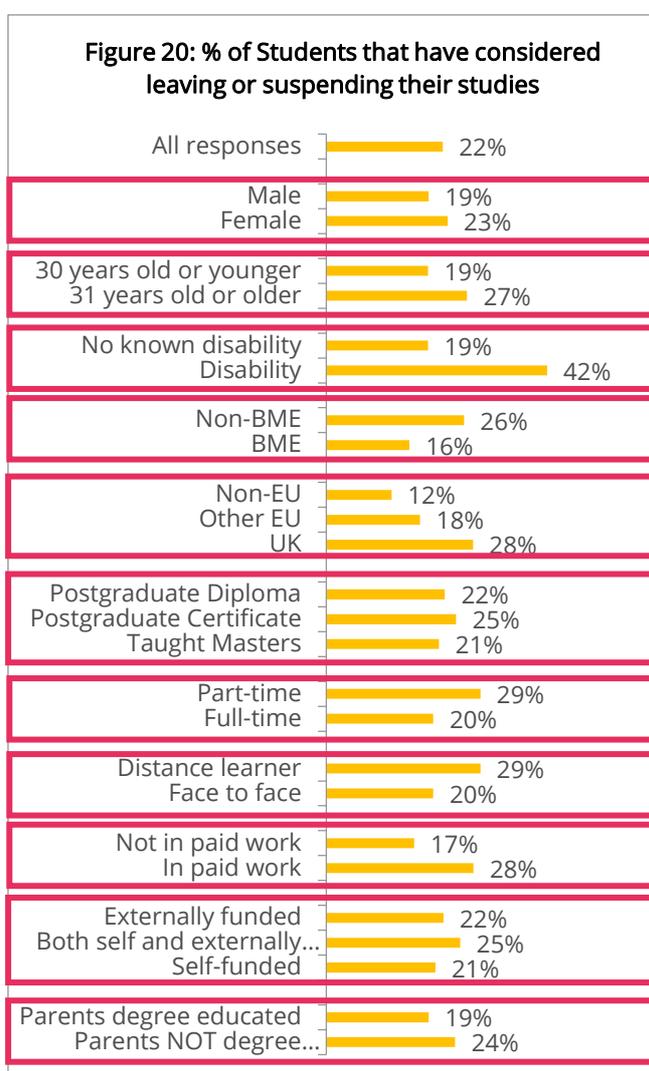| Characteristic	%
All responses	22%
Male	19%
Female	23%
30 years old or younger	19%
31 years old or older	27%
No known disability	19%
Disability	42%
Non-BME	26%
BME	16%
Non-EU	12%
Other EU	18%
UK	28%
Postgraduate Diploma	22%
Postgraduate Certificate	25%
Taught Masters	21%
Part-time	29%
Full-time	20%
Distance learner	29%
Face to face	20%
Not in paid work	17%
In paid work	28%
Externally funded	22%
Both self and externally…	25%
Self-funded	21%
Parents degree educated	19%
Parents NOT degree…	24%

Figure 20 highlights important differences within certain student characteristics. Several of these differences point to the difficulties associated with balancing work and study. For example: there are differences between students in paid work and not in paid work; age differences; differences between part-time and full-time students; and differences between distance and face-to-face learners.

However, other differences point more directly to widening participation and equality and diversity, which are explored further in the following section.

5.2 Retention vulnerability by widening participation and equal opportunity characteristics

As mentioned above, initial analysis of the results highlighted differences between key student characteristics that have potential implications for widening participation and equal opportunities; as such, it is worth exploring these further to gain a greater understanding.

5.2.1 Retention of full-time and part-time students by whether they undertake paid work

It is evident from figure 20 that students who undertake paid work were 11% more likely to have considered leaving or suspending their studies than students who do not undertake paid work. Figure 20 also illustrates how part-time students were 9% more likely to have considered leaving or suspending their studies than full-time students. On closer examination, this difference between part–time and full-time students is reduced to only 3% when participation in paid work is taken into consideration (see figure 21).

Figure 21

Full/part-time students that have considered leaving or suspending course by participation in paid work
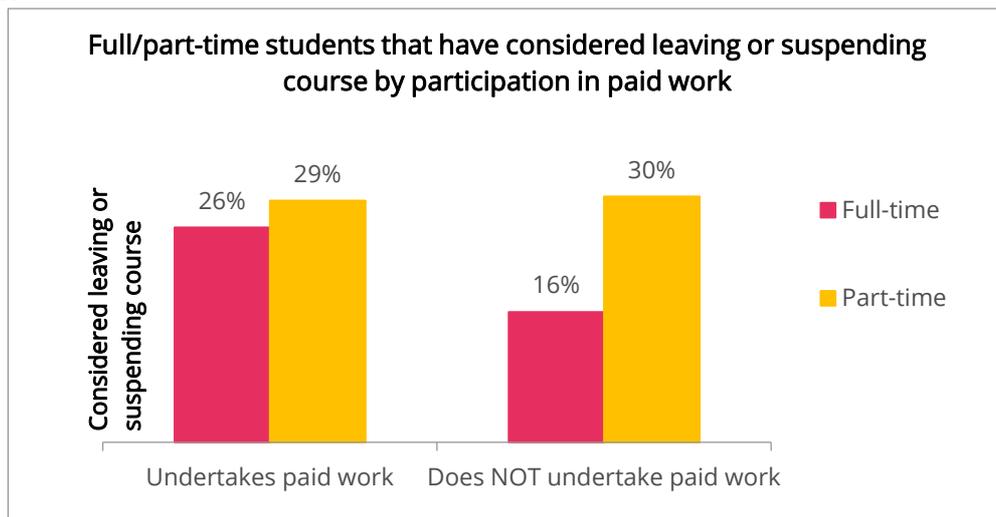
5.2.2 Parental education, retention and paid work

A question about parental education was added to PTES this year, which is an important widening participation measure. It was evident in figure 20 that students whose parents were not educated to degree level had considered leaving or suspending their studies 5% more than those whose parents had been educated to degree level.

Further analysis of the data found that students whose parents were not educated to degree level were 15% more likely to participate in paid employment than those whose parents were educated to degree level. Given the relationship between participation in paid employment and retention, this provides further insight into the difference in the retention figures of students from different parental education backgrounds.

5.2.3 Disability and retention

The stark contrast between students that have a disability and those that do not with regards to retention considerations is evident from figure 20, with 42% of people with a disability having considered leaving or suspending their study, compared to 19% of people without a disability (a 23% difference). Figure 22 illustrates retention vulnerability by type of disability. It is evident from this that there are serious implications for the support of students with disabilities of all types.

Figure 22

% of students that have considered leaving or suspending their study by type of disability

Type of disability	%
No disability	19%
Deaf or serious hearing impairment	38%
A specific learning difficulty such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, or ADHD	39%
Long standing illness or health condition	41%
A physical impairment or mobility issues	43%
Blind or a serious visual impairment	45%
Social/communication impairment such as Asperger's syndrome	47%
A mental health condition, such as depression, schizophrenia or anxiety disorder	51%

With 51% of students with mental health conditions considering leaving or suspending their course, it is this group of students that appear the most vulnerable. This is a concerning finding, especially given that, with 3.5% of the whole sample reporting they had a mental health condition, this was the most common disability disclosed.

It is beyond the scope of PTES to be able to explore fully the reasons why such differences in retention vulnerability exist between those students with a disability and those without, since PTES focuses primarily on the taught elements of university life. Students do not exist in a vacuum of study; they are holistic people whose experiences at university are influenced by many factors (e.g. social, economic, psychological, spiritual and physical). It was seen in the previous chapter that students with a disability scored lower than students without a disability on overall satisfaction with quality of course (5% lower), as well as support for learning (6% lower) and course organization (8% lower). However, the 23% difference in the retention question between those with a disability and those without is by far the greatest difference across the survey.

The differences in experiences of students with a disability and those without are recognised within the higher education sector and are continually researched and evaluated through work undertaken by organisations such as the ECU and HEA. The PTES findings reinforce these differences and highlight the need for continued support for students with disabilities.

6.   Conclusion

This report has presented and discussed the national results for PTES 2017. The results were extremely positive, reinforcing the quality of postgraduate education in the UK. Information given to prospective students and access to resources were the most positive scoring areas, whereas the lowest scoring areas were assessment and course organisation.

Information given to prospective students as the most positively scoring area in the questionnaire may appear to be quite a prosaic positive. However the results on motivations for choosing a particular institution and the relationship between these and overall course satisfaction show that information about the course prior to course choice is extremely important.

Analysis found that satisfaction with support for learning and satisfaction with course organisation were the items in the survey that had the strongest positive relationship with perceptions of overall course quality. This is useful information as it provides a potential starting point for institutions in understanding how to enhance the student experience.

The new question in the survey assessing retention vulnerability has provided valuable insights into the student experience, particularly with regards to the considerable differences between certain student groups.

The differences in results between key student characteristics suggest that provision is not servicing all postgraduate students equally. HEIs need to consider their systems, structures, processes and curricula to ensure they provide equality of opportunity and experience for all. There is ongoing work in this area and rich resources to support institutions are available through organisations such as the ECU and the HEA.

Appendix 1: Participation in PTES – demographic breakdown

The table below presents the demographic breakdown for the respondents to PTES 2017 and compares this to the HESA statistics[3]. A comparison with the HESA statistics illustrates how representative the PTES sample is of the broader taught postgraduate population.

Demographic	PTES numbers	PTES %	HESA numbers	HESA %
Mode of study				
Full time	58,892	69.8%	182,355	61.1%
Part time	25,454	30.2%	114,850	38.6%
Disability breakdown				
A long-standing illness or health condition	1,132	1.3%	2,550	0.9%
A physical impairment or mobility issues	566	0.7%	940	0.3%
Another disability, impairment or medical condition	845	1.0%	2,055	0.7%
Blind or a serious visual impairment	237	0.3%	345	0.1%
Deaf or a serious hearing impairment	311	0.4%	590	0.2%
Mental health condition	2,964	3.5%	3,245	1.1%
Personal care support		N/A	N/A	0.0%
Social communication/Autistic spectrum disorder	662	0.8%	400	0.1%
Specific learning difficulty	2,853	3.4%	8,715	2.9%
Two or more conditions		N/A	1,735	0.6%
PTES - prefer not to say	981	1.2%	N/A	N/A
No disability	74,293	88.4%	276,635	93.1%
Mission group				
Post 92 filter	26,479	31.3%	109,905	37.0%
Pre 92 filter	55,103	65.2%	182,585	61.4%
Russell Group filter	36,951	43.7%	101,680	34.2%
GuildHE filter	2,240	2.6%	5,975	2.0%
Million Plus filter	4,821	5.7%	22,665	7.6%
University Alliance filter	10,518	12.4%	54,290	18.3%
Residence				
UK	45,792	56.5%	154,990	52.1%
Other EU	6,872	8.5%	26,540	8.9%
Non-EU	28,314	35.0%	115,285	38.8%
Gender				
Female	51,339	60.8%	166,600	56.1%

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[3] HESA Student Record [2015-16]. Copyright Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited. Neither the Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited nor HESA Services Limited can accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from data or other information obtained from Heidi Plus.

Demographic	PTES numbers	PTES %	HESA numbers	HESA %
Male	32,534	38.5%	130,540	43.9%
Other	96	0.1%	65	0.0%
Prefer not to say	468	0.6%	N/A	N/A
Ethnicity - UK residence only				
Non-BME	35,378	77.5%	117,195	75.6%
BME	10,281	22.5%	33,495	21.6%
Unknown	133	0.3%	4,295	2.7%

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