

## UNIVERSITY OF ABERDEEN

## UNIVERSITY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

**POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE SURVEY 2023****1. PURPOSE OF THE PAPER**

*This paper presents a summary of the University of Aberdeen results of the Postgraduate Research Experience 2023 survey, with comparison to sector averages.*

**2. PREVIOUS CONSIDERATION BY /FURTHER APPROVAL REQUIRED**

*All papers but in particular those for Senior Management Team should explain:*

- *Which groups/committees have considered the paper/issue already*
- *Which groups/committees will need to consider the paper from this point forward*

*Where further information is needed, for example, to report particular comments received from other groups/committees, this can either be provided under the box below or elsewhere in the paper as appropriate.*

	<b>Board/Committee</b>	<b>Date</b>
Previously considered/approved by	PGRC	04/12/2023
Further consideration/ approval required by	SSEC	15/02/2024

**3. RECOMMENDED ACTION**

*The University Education Committee is invited to note the data and proposed actions.*

**4. DISCUSSION**

- 4.1 The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) is coordinated by Advance HE and enables institutions to gather information about the experience of Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs).
- 4.2 The survey focuses on students' experiences of:
- supervision
  - resources
  - research community
  - progress and assessment
  - skills and professional development
  - wellbeing
- 4.3 PRES results can be used to benchmark the University of Aberdeen's postgraduate provision against others in the global higher education sector.
- 4.4 PRES runs annually between February and May. The UoA last ran PRES in 2017 and launched the 2023 survey in April 2023. A response rate of 21%, representing 316 responses was received. Whilst this is below the sector average, the decision to run PRES was made very late allowing for the survey only to open late April (compared with Feb-May across the sector).

- 4.5 The overall satisfaction of Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) at the University with was 81% which is above the global sector which at 79%. This ranks the UoA 33rd out of 100 for overall satisfaction. UoA reported 79% satisfaction in 2017 which aligned with the sector average (79%) which is unchanged in 2023.
- 4.6 Aspects of best practice (with most agreement relative to the benchmark), were on supervision, campus working space and access to resources. Research culture and PGR community are areas for improvement.

## 5. FURTHER INFORMATION

Further information is available from Stuart Piertney, Dean for Postgraduate Research ([s.piertney@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:s.piertney@abdn.ac.uk)) and Lucy Leiper, Postgraduate Research School Manager ([l.leiper@abdn.ac.uk](mailto:l.leiper@abdn.ac.uk)).

*29 January 2024*

**Freedom of Information/Confidentiality Status:** Open



# POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE SURVEY

20

23

# BACKGROUND

## POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE SURVEY

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) is coordinated by Advance HE and enables institutions to gather information about the experience of Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs).

The survey focuses on students' experiences of:

- supervision
- resources
- research community
- progress and assessment
- skills and professional development
- wellbeing



It also considers students' motivations for taking their programme.

PRES results can be used to benchmark the University of Aberdeen's postgraduate provision against others in the global higher education sector.

PRES runs annually between February and May. The UoA last ran PRES in 2017 and launched the 2023 survey in April 2023. A response rate of 21%, representing 316 responses was received. Whilst this is below the sector average, the decision to run PRES was made very late allowing for the survey only to open late April (compared with Feb-May across the sector).

PRES 2024 will launch in February 2024 and run until May 2024.

# SUMMARY

## PRES 2023

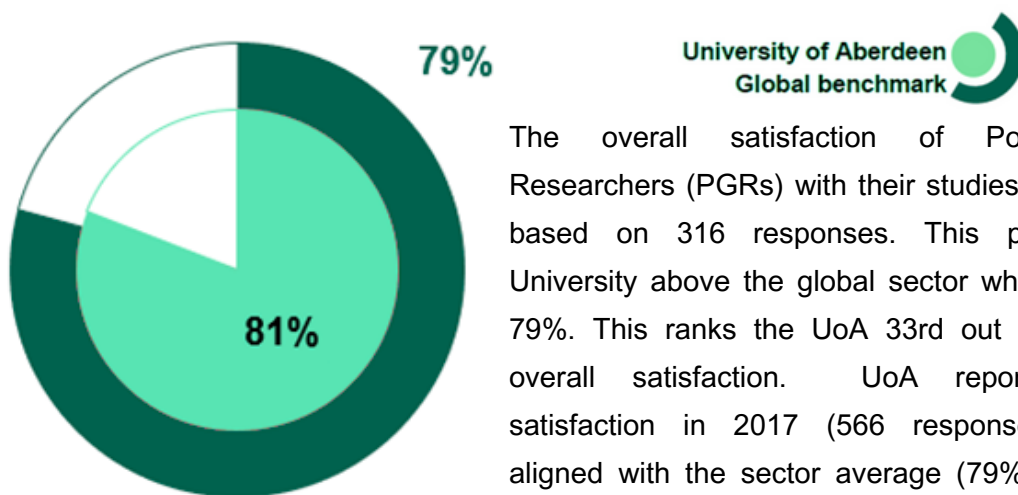
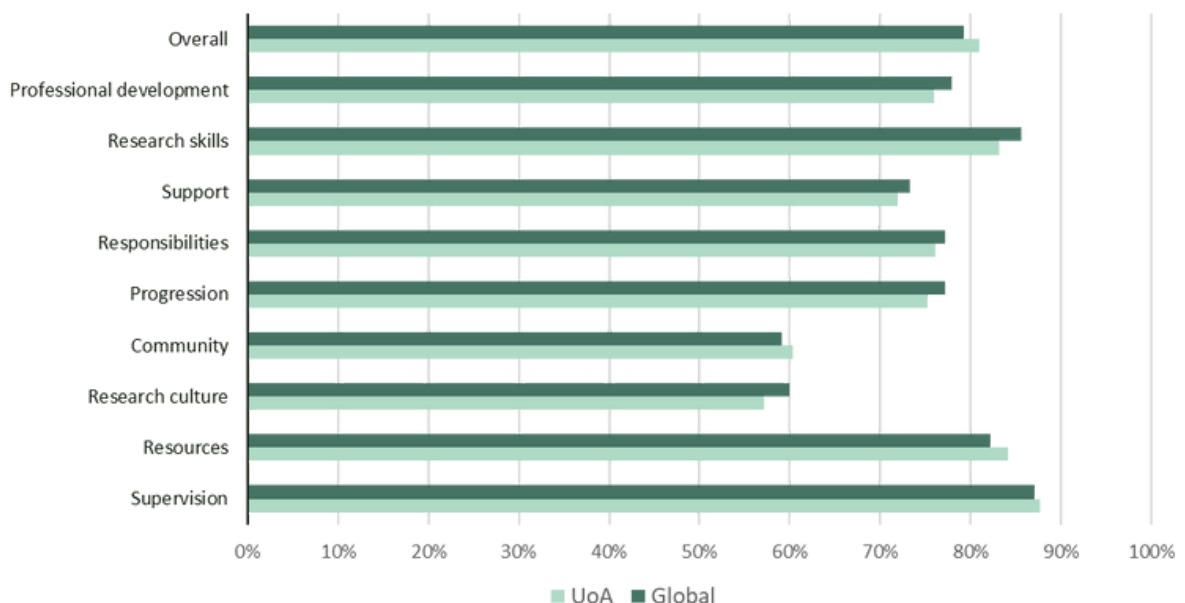


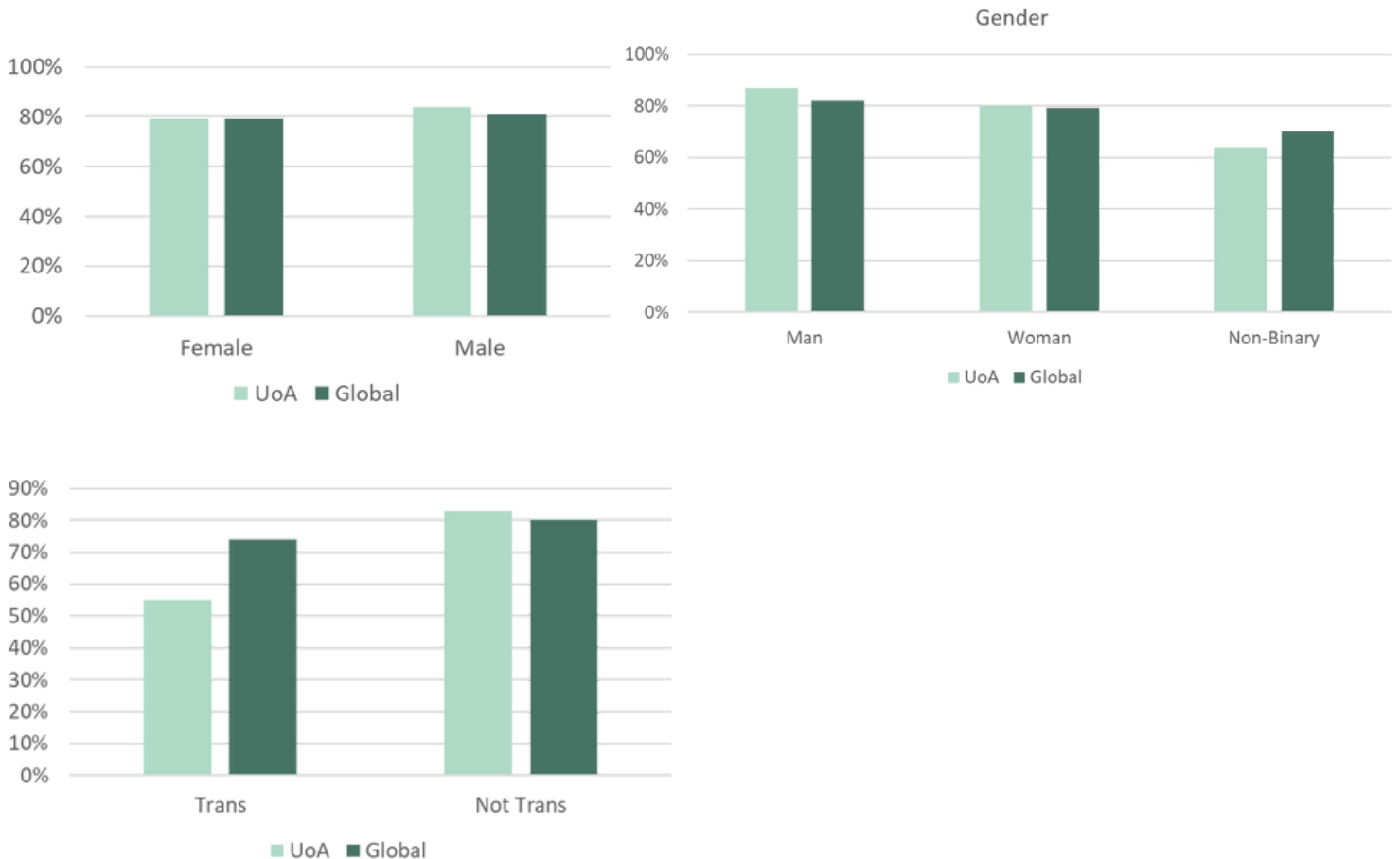
Figure 1: Overall satisfaction

The overall satisfaction of Postgraduate Researchers (PGRs) with their studies was 81%, based on 316 responses. This places the University above the global sector which reports 79%. This ranks the UoA 33rd out of 100 for overall satisfaction. UoA reported 79% satisfaction in 2017 (566 responses) which aligned with the sector average (79%) which is unchanged in 2023.

Aspects of best practice (with most agreement relative to the benchmark), were on supervision, campus working space and access to resources. Research culture and PGR community are areas for improvement.



# DEMOGRAPHICS



There is a difference between the sex categories, as 84% of male PGR students express overall satisfaction, while 79% of female PGR students report the same.

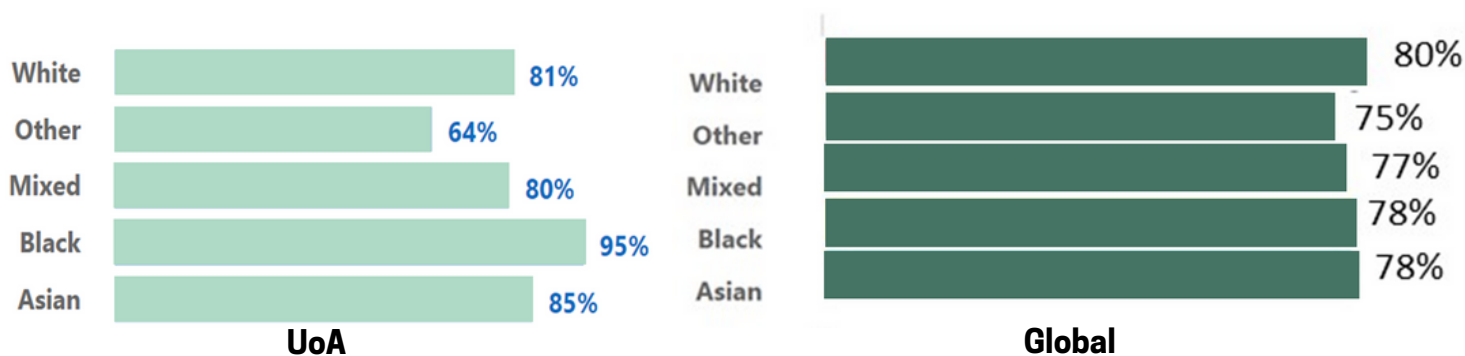
PGR students who identify as being men have a higher level of overall satisfaction than for those who identify as being women. The level of overall satisfaction among students who identify as being non-binary is much lower than for the other two categories at just 64%.

Students who declare that they have a transgender history have a lower level of overall satisfaction in comparison to their colleagues without transgender history (55% compared with 83%). The level of satisfaction of trans individuals is much lower in the UoA than the global benchmark (74%).

Within these groups (female, woman, non-binary and trans) satisfaction with research culture and community is repeatedly lower than that reported by male, man, binary and non-trans groups.

# DEMOGRAPHICS

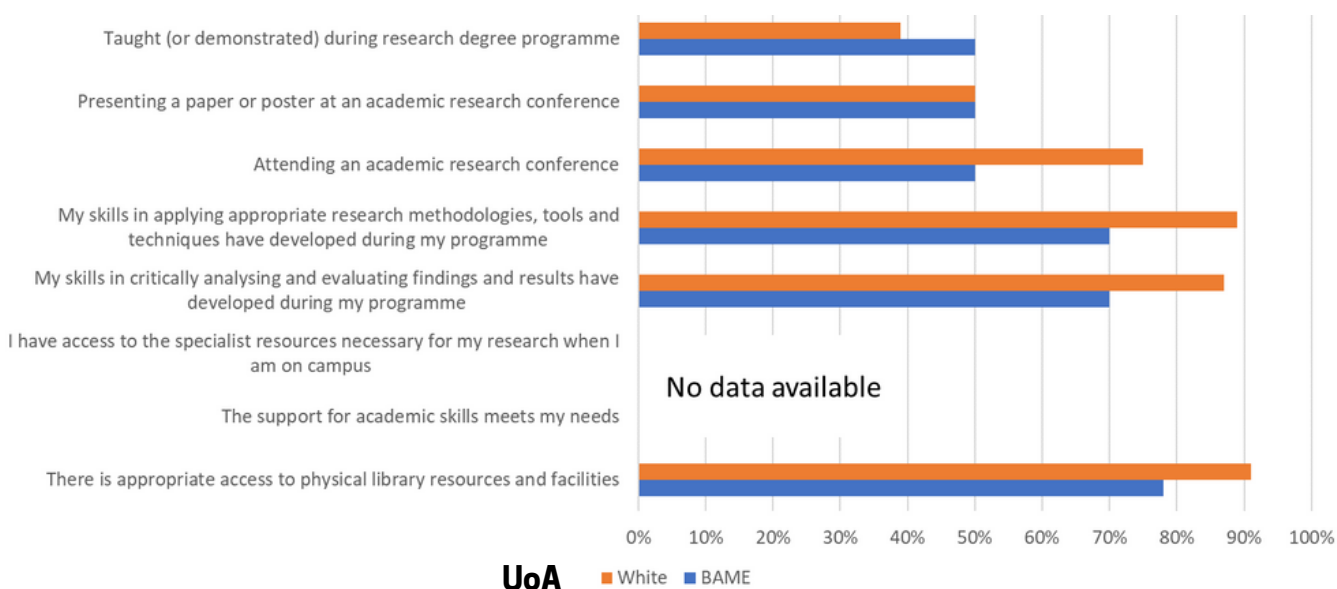
Overall satisfaction by Ethnicity.



PGRs with Black or Asian backgrounds have a higher level of overall satisfaction than for their White contemporaries at 95% and 85% respectively, whilst those from a Mixed background report a level of overall satisfaction close to the mean for White PGR students. Those identifying as being from an Other background (which covers two categories – Arab and Other) have a markedly lower level of overall satisfaction at just 64%.

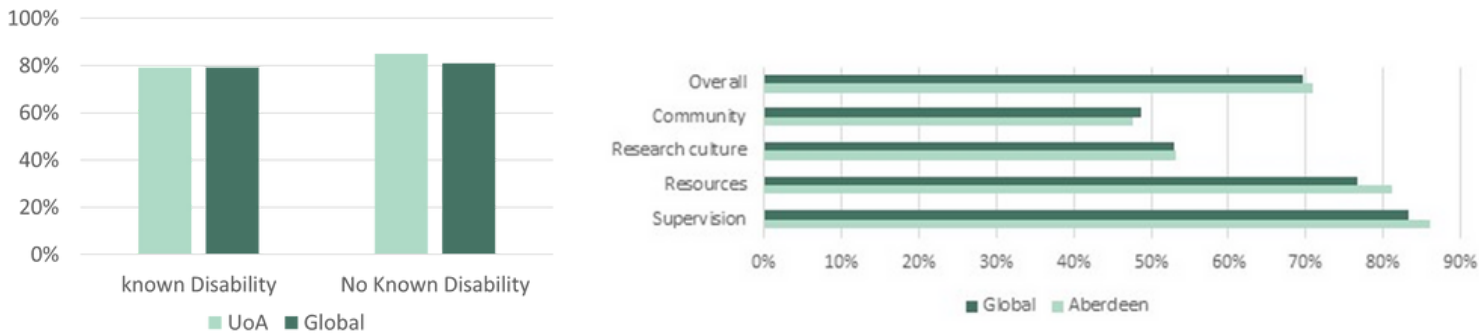
PGRs with Black background report significantly higher satisfaction at UoA than globally at 95% compared to 78%.

The sector reports specific gaps in the experience between PGRs from white and minority backgrounds particularly around access to development opportunities and skills development. Whilst the UoA does not see the same imbalance in relation to teaching, it is clear from the data below that there is a gap in access to academic conferences and acquisition of research skills.

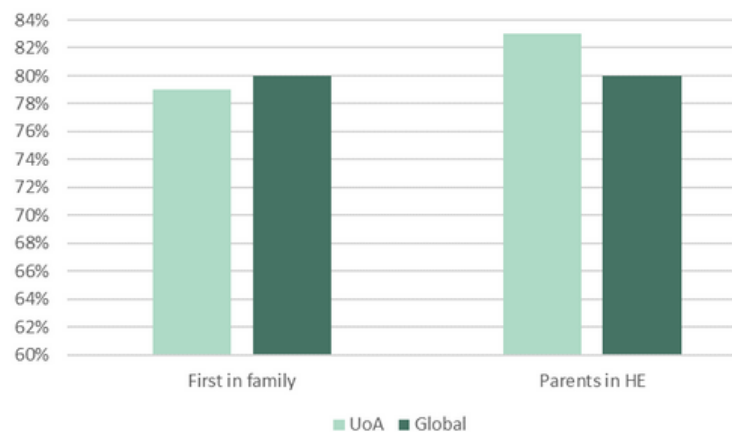
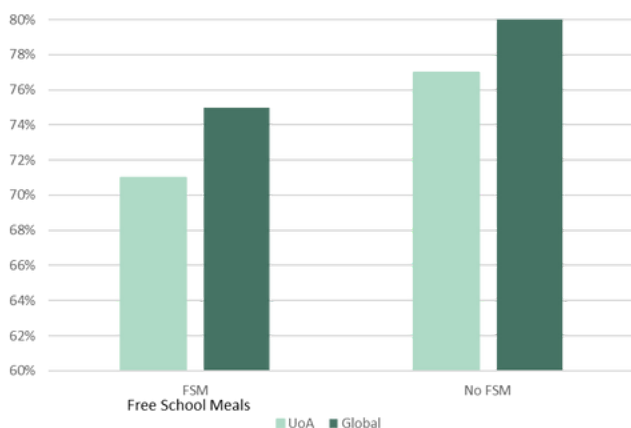


# DEMOGRAPHICS

Overall satisfaction by Disability and Social Background



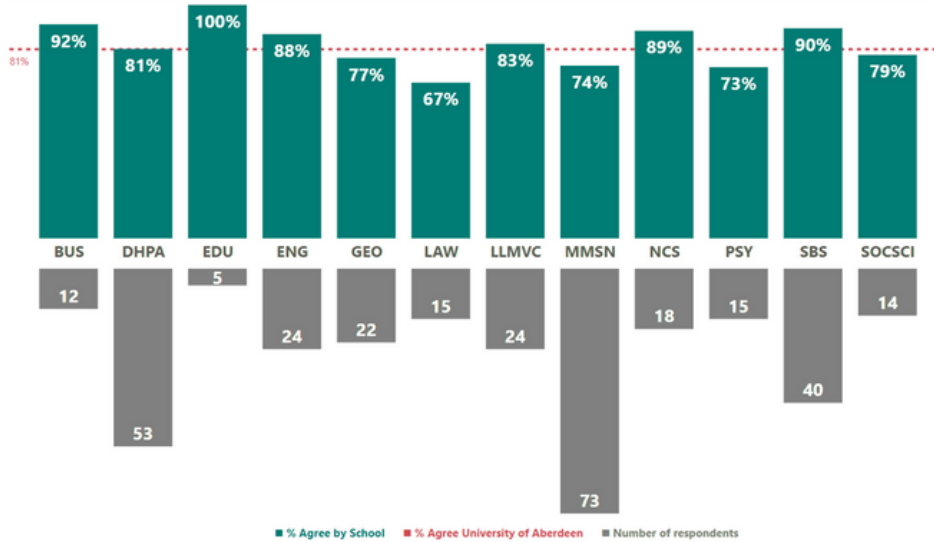
Compared to the global benchmark, PGRs at the UoA with a known disability report less overall satisfaction (71% than those without a disability (85%). As with other metrics (UoA and global), this is more noticeable in relation to culture and community. Satisfaction with supervision and access to resources however both exceed the global benchmark. There is no difference in overall satisfaction in terms of whether a PGR student is the first in their family to go to university. However, there is a gap within the UoA and across the sector where PGRs who received free school meals (a perceived indicator of less well off background) were less satisfied overall than those who did not, which is a significant finding. The UK PRES report indicated this gap is consistent across all areas within the survey.





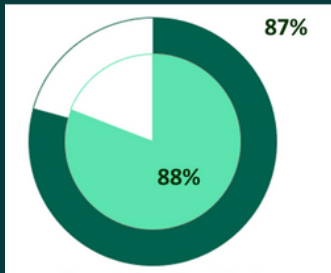
# DEMOGRAPHICS

University of Aberdeen performance for overall satisfaction by School, 2023.



University of Aberdeen performance for overall satisfaction by year on programme 2023.

# FOCUS ON:



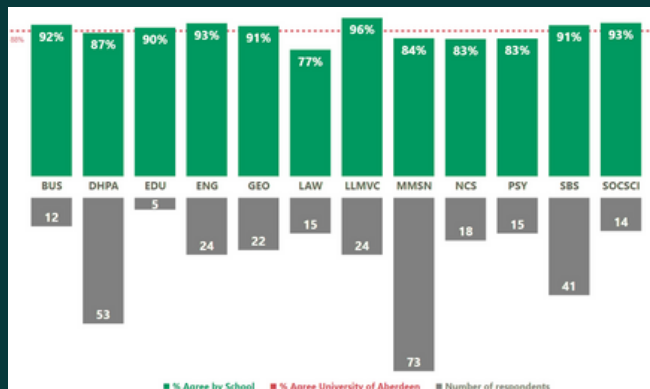
## 01 — Supervision

UoA reports 88% for % Agree against the questions in the section on supervision (increased from 86% in 2017). This compares favourably against sector performance which indicates that the sector has consistently scored around 87% for supervision over the five most recent years.

Supervision questions relate to skills and knowledge to support projects; identification of training needs; contact and feedback.

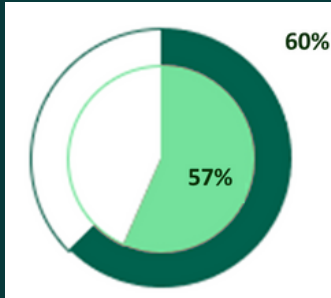
The highest % Agree scores\* for supervision are found in ENG, LLMVC and SOCSOI. The lowest % Agree scores are found in LAW, NCS and PSY.

The UoA exceeds the sector across most parameters for supervision which indicates wide-ranging satisfaction with supervision support particularly around subject expertise, training and contact. Of course institutionally we know there are areas where supervisory issues exist and where students feel this needs improved.



\*% highest - 5 or more % points above University score. % lowest score - 5 or less points below University score

# FOCUS ON:



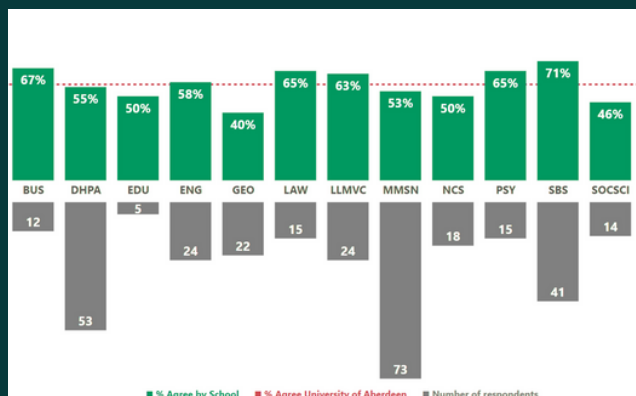
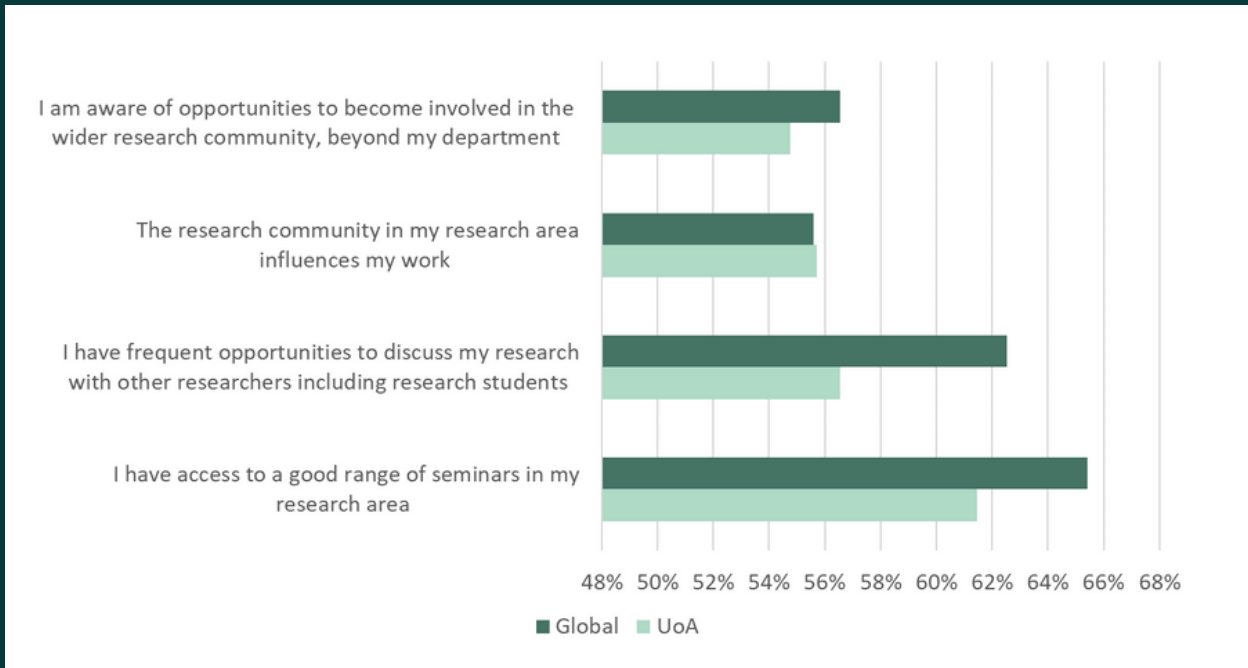
## 02 — Research Culture

UoA reports 57% for % Agree against the questions in the section on research culture. Although the sector figure is higher at 60% both values are well below other focus areas.

Research Culture in PRES questions relate to research seminars and opportunities to discuss research with other researchers. However, we would argue that within the UoA this is too narrow a view of research culture and one that doesn't fully align with the emerging People, Culture and Environment elements of REF 2029.

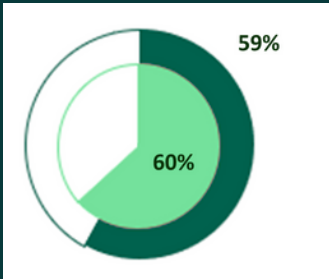
The highest % Agree scores for research culture are found in BUS, LAW, LLMVC, PSY and SBS. The lowest % Agree scores are found in EDU, GEO, NCS and SOCSCI.

The UoA falls significantly behind the sector in relation to access to discussing research with other researchers (it is not clear if this refers to researchers within or across their discipline) and around access to the range of seminars within their research area.



\*% highest - 5 or more % points above University score. % lowest score - 5 or less points below University score

# FOCUS ON:



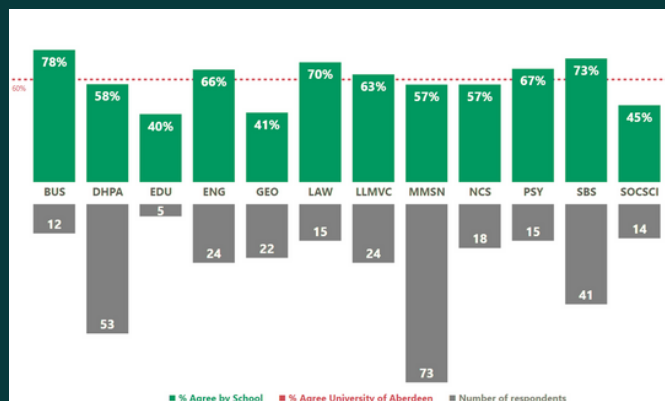
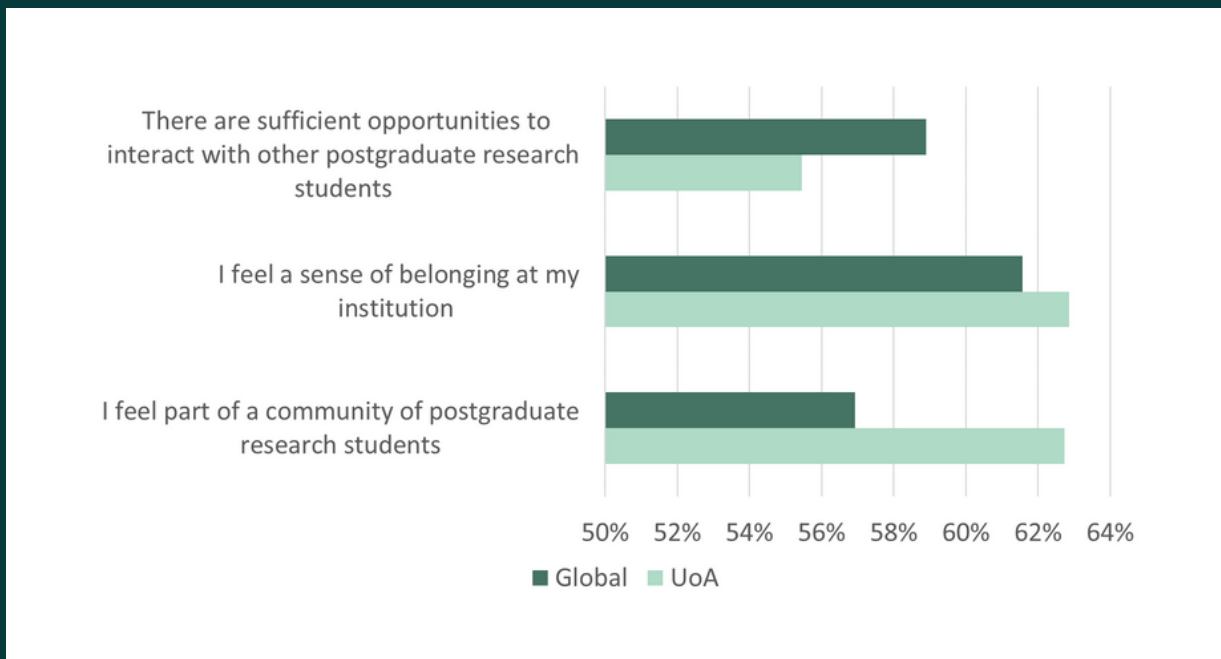
## 03 — PGR Community

UoA reports 60% for % Agree against the questions in the section on community. This places the University just above the sector score of 59%.

PGR Community questions relate to sense of belonging and opportunities to interact with other PGRs.

The highest % Agree scores for community are found in BUS, ENG, LAW, PSY and SBS. The lowest % Agree scores are found in EDU, GEO and SOCSOCI.

Responses related to satisfaction with feeling part of a community are significantly lower across the sector. Aberdeen is behind the sector in relation to opportunities to interact with other PGRs (57%) but performs better in relation to a sense of belonging (63%) and feeling part of a community (63%).



\*% highest - 5 or more % points above University score. % lowest score - 5 or less points below University score

# FOCUS ON:

## 05 — Training and Development

A key element of the wider experience of postgraduate researchers is the availability of training and development support and opportunities that span research and discipline specific skills to broader professional and transferable skills.

In the PRES survey training and development data spans a number of different categories including:

- Research Skills, (eg methodologies, critical analysis, creativity, integrity)
- Professional Development (eg networking, project management, communication)
- Skills Training and Career Advice (transferable skills, career guidance, development opportunities).

Within the UoA % satisfaction with training and development is slightly behind the sector across different measures, most notably around agreeing a personal development plan which records 38% agreement compared with the sector average of 46%.

Whilst the UoA is above sector average in relation to receiving careers advice, this relates to only 35 % (compared with sector 32%) of respondents indicating this is available. It should be noted that the survey does not indicate the source of the careers advice and if this refers to supervisory teams, Careers Services or both. The UKRI New Deal for PGRs cites the importance of providing advice and to PGR students about the full range of careers paths open to them.



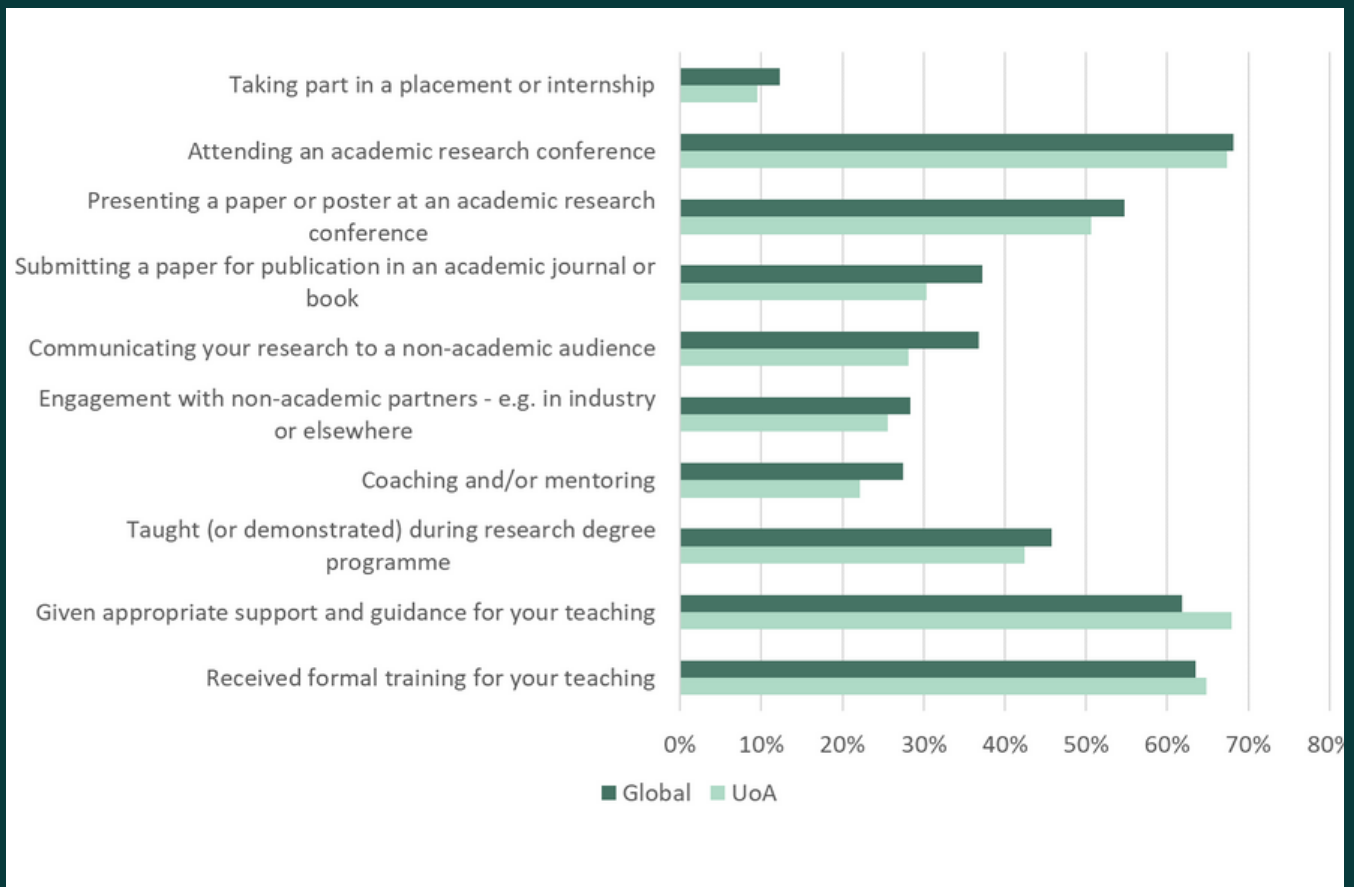
# FOCUS ON:

## 05 — Training and Development

Additionally the PGR experience is related to the opportunities provided and taken up by PGRs. This can include showcasing research, sharing skills with others through coaching or engaging in direct career preparation such as internships and placements. Opportunities to teach or demonstrate are also seen as a valued aspect of the experience.

Respondents indicate below a range of activities undertaken including presenting research posters, publishing research, teaching and attending conferences. However, only 9% of respondents report they have had the opportunity to undertake a placement or internship.

Given the recently announced UKRI New Deal for PGRs specifically references internships as a core part of PGR development and their importance as a mechanism to support the porosity of skilled people between academia and the wider private sector, the UoA must focus on improving in this area.



# PROGRESS AND ACTIONS

FOCUS AREA	ACTIVITY/ PROJECT	STATUS
COMMUNITY	Improved induction and orientation information and events - focused on community building to foster sense of belonging. Feedback from PGR community is positive. ASES indicated timing of event was problematic for many so decision made to move timing to early Oct, Feb, June	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete</li> <li>• Confirmed change of timescale for orientation events</li> </ul>
	PGR Community Fund - PGR led initiative to establish and maintain community activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Budget dependent</li> </ul>
	Intercultural event for PGRs to celebrate our diversity and to encourage networking across disciplines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Experience Funding secured for event in Jan 2024</li> </ul>
CULTURE	Working with Student Support and Experience to develop new guidelines for PGRs and Supervisors for supporting disabled PGRs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Guidelines approved by PGRC and SSEC and to be live in December 2023</li> </ul>
	Introduction of PGR specific Inclusive adjustments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Approved by SSEC and in operation</li> </ul>
SUPERVISION	Project to explore new and multifaceted challenges for supervisors related to increasing the diversity of the PGR population	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Student Experience funding secured for project, due to begin Feb 2024</li> </ul>
	Supervisor Development Masterclasses on EDI topics including Setting expectations, Supervising Neurodiverse PGRs, Trans awareness, Active Bystander and Ally	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scheduled for Feb 2024 and onwards</li> </ul>
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT	Increase number and range of funded internship/placements for PGRs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• TBD - requires investment</li> </ul>
	Focus groups with PGRs to inform Researcher Development Programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete</li> </ul>
	Peer mentoring for PGRs - virtual mentoring scheme piloted in 2021 with Wellbeing Team - format needs revised for PGR buy in and engagement was limited.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not started</li> </ul>
	Increase career workshops for PGRs and raise awareness of Careers Service for PGRs.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In place and ongoing</li> </ul>