Improving response rates in the PRES

Dr Darren Van Laar

Director of the Graduate School
University of Portsmouth

Overview

- What is PRES?
- History of PRES surveys at Portsmouth
- Why do we usually get good response rates?
- What do we do?
- Messages and reminders
- Other tips

What is the PRES?

- PRES is the *Postgraduate Research Experience Survey*, a national survey of PGR students, available to all UK HEIs and produced and administered by the UK based Charity, AdvanceHE.

- The survey is available every year, but most HEIs only take part every two years.

- The survey consists of approximately 44 core questions, in 9 sections, with an additional 16 demographic or programme specific questions, and an additional 10 open questions.

- AdvanceHE provides the survey and question formats, but individual HEIs are responsible for encouraging their own students to complete the survey.

- The surveys are usually live between February and mid May, with AdvanceHE providing national benchmark data and summaries in July each year.

6. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the research culture?

6_1_a. I have access to a good range of seminars in my research area

6_2_a. I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other researchers including research students

6_3_a. The research community in my research area influences my work

6_4_a. I am aware of opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department

UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH

History of PRES surveys at Portsmouth

- UoP conducted their first PRES survey in 2011

- Conducted Annually since 2013 (except in 2020)

- PRES results are written up into a comprehensive report and used by Graduate School, departments and faculties to identify problem areas and areas of good practice

- Since 2021 PRES scores have been used in formal internal quality assessments of each department's PGR students.

- Response rates are therefore very important at UoP – to ensure representative data and to persuade staff and students of the credibility and reliability of the PRES scores.

867 University of Portsmouth (UoP) PGRs were eligible to receive the PRES survey in 2023

- Response rates:

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
UoP	38%	56%	53%	49%	66%	61%	62%	-	55%	52%	47%
Sector	42%	-	40%	-	43%	39%	42%	?	36%	31%	28%

Why do we usually get good response rates?

- Probably *not* because our students are keener and more engaged a community than other universities...

- Probably *not* because of the size of our University - our 900 PRES - eligible students place us as a medium sized provider of PGR degrees.

- Probably *not* because we have a fully financed on-campus captive audience – more than half of our students are Part-time, 25% are Prof Docs.

- Probably *not* because we are the best rated university for PGRs in the country (although we are usually above the sector average).

- *More likely* it's because we redesigned and restructured our survey distribution and reminder procedures in 2014 because we were very disappointed with our response rates and tasked one of our survey methods experts to rethink our approach.

PRES 2022

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCE SURVEY (PRES)

Research degree students – have your say and you could win £1,000

port.ac.uk/pres

What do we do?

	Students	Supervisors	PGR leads and HoDs
Pre-survey	High quality post cards, posters and website appear 2-3 weeks before Personal email the week before	Email to all supervisors the week before	Dates and Information at PGR committees the month before
Survey day	Personal email with personal link high in message and full case for survey. Include the 'you said we did' leaflet	PGR lead sends local emails	Email reminder that PRES has started
Reminders	Those who do not return the survey have 5 x reminders [More information on next slide]	PGR lead sends local emails	PGR leads receive weekly colour coded response rates for all Depts
Post survey	Within a month after the survey has ended, provide overall response rate and mention the Prize winner, and what will happen next	Email to say thanks and let them know what happens next	Email with final colour coded response rates sent to PGR leads
The rest of the year	Occasional reminder of PRES and engagement with the student reps over findings and actions Key PRES data used in quality reviews	Detailed PRES report is produced (for September) DoGs attends Faculty and other PGR Committees to present results and talk about good practice and actions and to thank everyone	

2023 PRES Marketing Collateral

port.ac.uk/pres

Messages and Reminders

AdvanceHE

	% RRrates increase 2021

- Each year the local PRES Survey team discusses and then agrees a reference set of email templates, with the wording and dates of all messages agreed in advance.

- The reminder messages are consciously designed to appeal to different types of respondent, with reminders only sent to PGRs who have yet to return the survey.
  - *Week 1: +17%*

- After 1 week: "Did you forget to complete the PRES 2021 survey?" – Polite reminder with a similar level of information to the main survey invite.
  - *+8%*

- After 2 weeks: "Your response to the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2021" – 'I am writing to formally remind you…' formally worded message from the PVC.
  - *+8%*

- After 3 weeks: "PRES 2021 survey – please respond" – A brief email emphasising how short the survey is, the prize draw, and how the reminders will stop if they return the survey.
  - *+8%*

- After 4 weeks: "PRES 2021 survey – only one more week to respond" – Chatty email reminding them of the advantages to them personally of completing the survey.
  - *+7%*

- After 5 weeks: "PRES 2021 Survey is about to close – HAVE YOUR SAY and be entered in the £1,000 prize draw!" – final reminder emphasising how important it is to our university to have a good response rate.
  - *+7%*

After the PRES…

- We decided in 2013 to conduct the PRES every year, and now have 10 years of longitudinal data on PGR satisfaction at our university.

- The full (45pp) PRES report, including SPSS and Excel templates, was created in-house by our Graduate School and now is used by the University survey team to quickly fill-in-the-gaps for the new report each year.

- The PRES can be a treasure trove of information and data. As DoGs, I probably refer to the data within the summary report at least once every week.

- Since 2021, five of the main PRES questions have been used in our annual departmental quality enhancement exercise. This concentrates minds wonderfully when it comes to following up on PRES actions ☺

- This all contributes to the perceived relevance and therefore the importance of the PRES in the University.

UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH
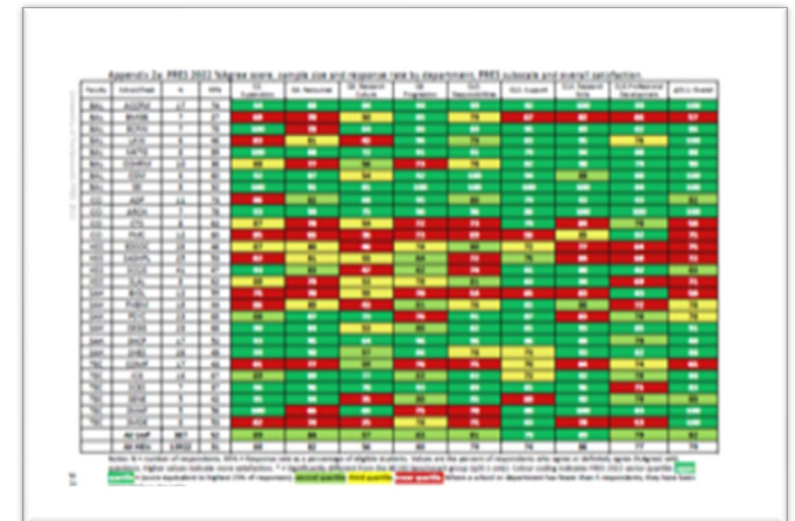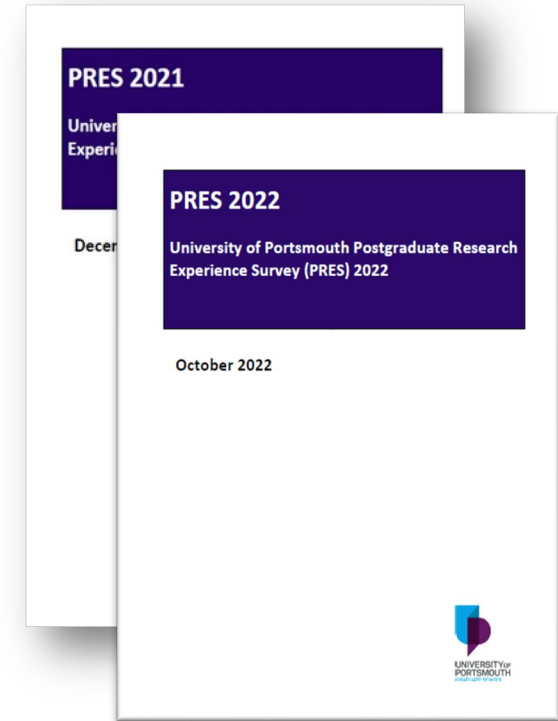
Other tips…

- Make sure your Faculty Academic and Departmental leads are aware of the importance of the PRES and are willing to email reminders to local supervisors and students if needed.

- Ensure the sample frame is carefully specified. No point in sending surveys to students who are not available (e.g. currently interrupting) or won't be looking at their emails.

- Our single big £1,000 prize seems to work better than many smaller prizes. We make a big fuss of the Prize winner.

- Plan and prepare. Even the day and time of the survey email and reminders are carefully planned (usually 11am on a Tuesday).

- If I had to recommend one thing: Provide strong encouragement to your PGR leads (and possibly Heads and Research Leads) by sending them a comparison of all departmental response rates each week the survey is open.

port.ac.uk/pres

UKCGE 2023

Improving PRES Response Rates

- Any questions?

- Any tips for others?

UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH

**Improving PRES
Response Rates**

Contact: darren.van.laar@port.ac.uk

UoP PRES Report format – not part of main talk

- A detailed (45pp) report breaking down key areas using colour coded tables to show Faculty and departmental performance with recommendations.

Table 3: PRES 2021 University and Faculty subscale and overall questions %Agree scores, N of respondents and % response rates.

	N	RR%	Supervision	Resources	Research Culture	Progression	Responsibilities	Support	Research Skills	Professional Development	Covid	Overall	2019 Overall
ALL HEIs	39855	36	88	75	56	80	80	73	85	76	72	80	81
All UoP	499	55											
		58											
		59											
		53											
		52											
		58											

Notes: N = number of respondents. RR% = Response rate as a percentage of eligible students. %Agree scores are the average % respondents who agree or definitely agree with questions, except ALL HEI data which are median scores. Higher values indicate more satisfaction. * = Significantly different from the All HEI benchmark group ±5%. Q20.1 = "Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme". Colour coding indicates PRES 2021 sector quartile where (e.g.) a score in the top quartile places the area of the university indicated in the top 25% of universities who undertook PRES 2021.

| Lowest Quartile | 3rd Quartile | 2nd Quartile | Top Quartile |

UNIVERSITY OF PORTSMOUTH