



# Experiences of Postgraduate Research Supervision: Exploring results from the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2021

Exploring postgraduate research students' perception of supervisory support

Maddie Pitkin, Research and Insights Executive

POSTGRADUATE  
RESEARCH EXPERIENCE  
SURVEY

# Overview

- About the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)
- How do PGRs feel about the different elements of supervision?
  - Do PGRs feel their supervisors have the skills and subject knowledge to support them with their research?
  - Do PGRs have regular contact with their supervisors?
  - Do PGRs feel their supervisors provide feedback that helps them direct their research activities?
  - Do supervisors help PGRs to identify their training and development needs as a researcher?
- How does supervision compare with other elements of the postgraduate student experience?
- Which groups are most and least satisfied with their supervision?
- What can we learn about PGRs' perceptions about supervision from their open text responses?

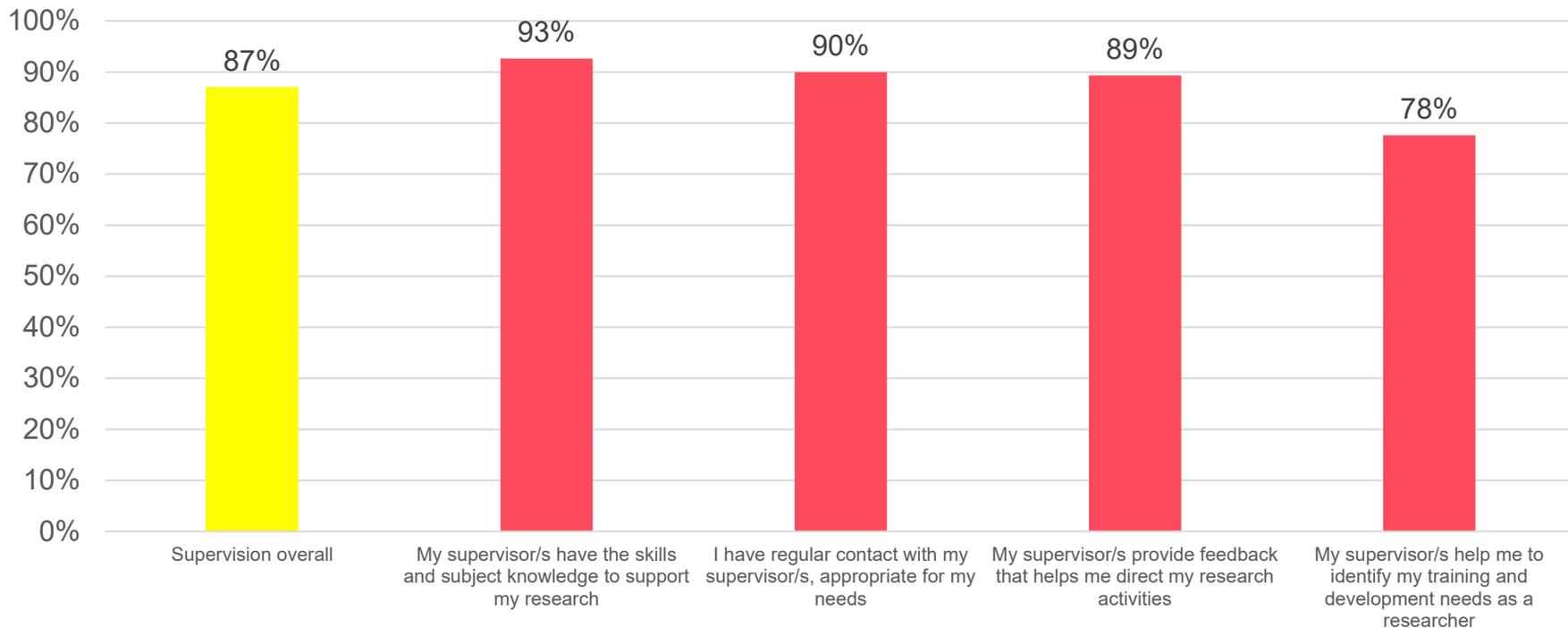
# About PRES

# Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)

- 1 of 3 student surveys that Advance HE delivers to drive improvement in the academic experience
- Annual survey of postgraduate research students
- Largest survey of its kind
- 2021 saw 39,855 PGRs take part, from 89 HEIs
- Focuses on respondents' experiences of supervision, resources, progress and assessment, research community, skills, wellbeing and professional development

Do PGRs feel their supervisors have the skills and subject knowledge to support them with their research?

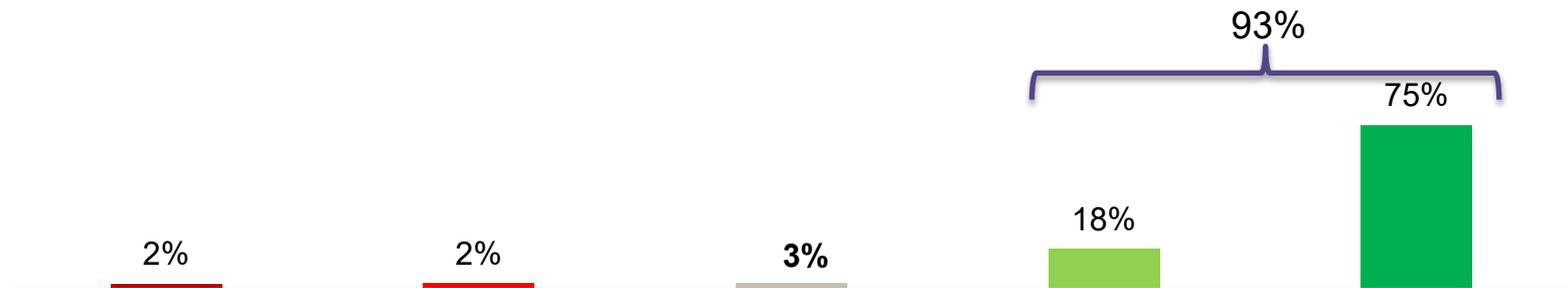
# Overall, 87% of PGRs are satisfied with their supervision



Min. base: 39,355

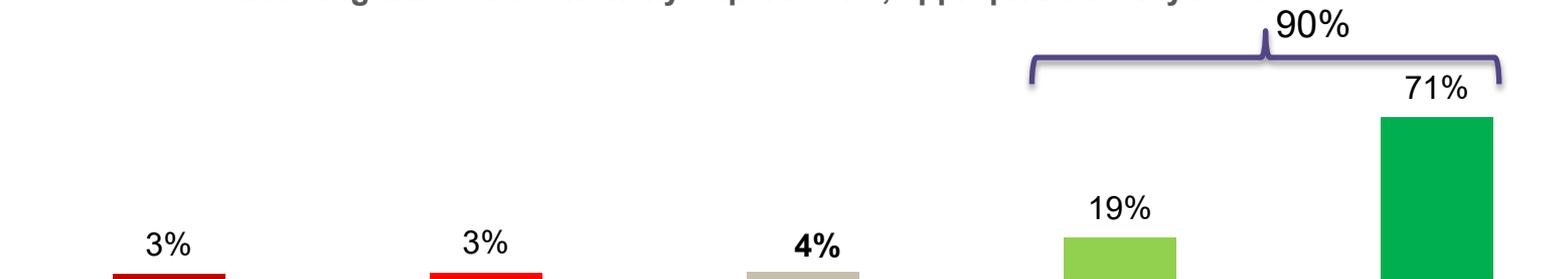
# Majority of PGRs report having supervisors with the necessary subject expertise and experience regular contact

My supervisor/s have the skills and subject knowledge to support my research



Base: 39,633

I have regular contact with my supervisor/s, appropriate for my needs



Base: 39,552

# The Covid-19 pandemic has had varying impacts on PGRs' supervision experiences

## Skills and knowledge

*I admire their leadership and decision-making skills. I hope to continue learning from them*

*They are incredibly experienced and knowledgeable and vastly improve my project*

*I couldn't ask for a more understanding, knowledgeable, and academically well-regarded supervision team. Both are excellent.*

## Regular contact

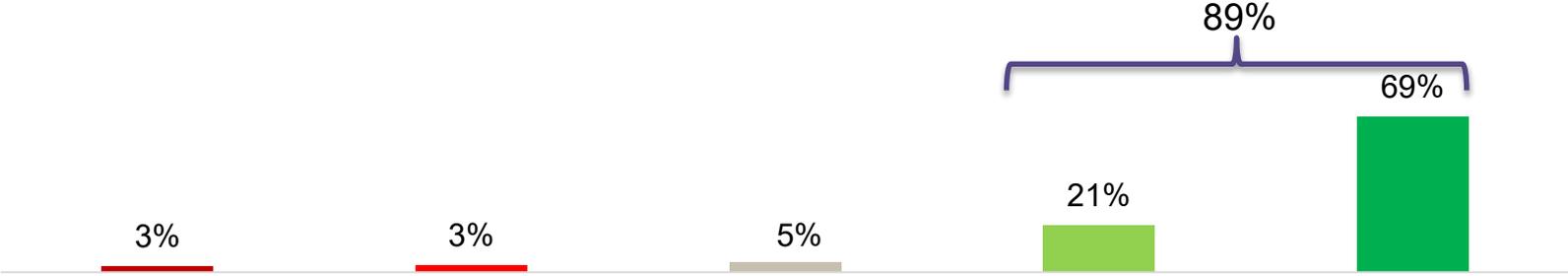
*I have a good relationship with my secondary supervisor, who has made themselves available when I require advice of which I am very grateful*

*Exceptional level of contact from my supervisor during lockdowns.*

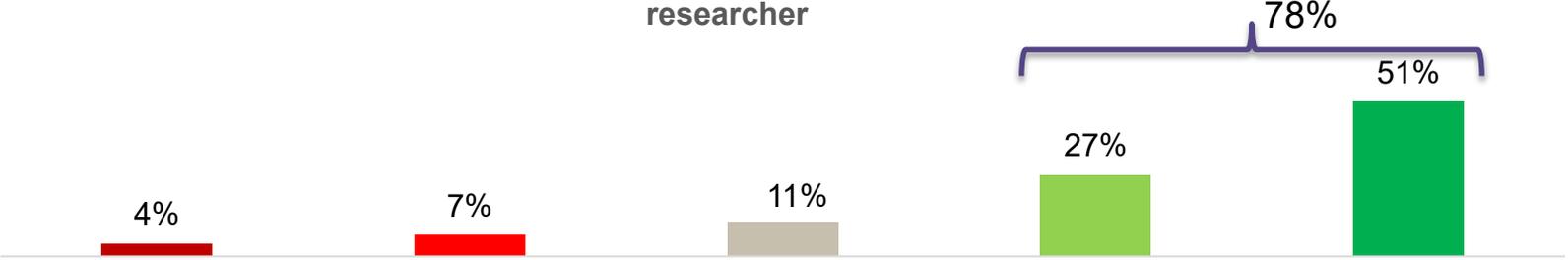
*The pandemic has reduced contact my supervisor to around 1 hour / week*

# The element fewest PGRs agree with is that their supervisors help them to identify their training and development needs

My supervisor/s provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities



My supervisor/s help me to identify my training and development needs as a researcher



Base: 39,524

Base: 39,355

# PGRs appreciate prompt and detailed feedback from their supervisors

## Feedback

*My supervisor always gave me some detailed feedback after meeting online which was so helpful for me to study*

*My supervisor always responds to questions, offers critical but supportive feedback, I feel totally supported by them*

*Supervisors often don't have enough time to provide quick feedback which results in a delay in paper publications/progress.*

## Identifying training and development needs

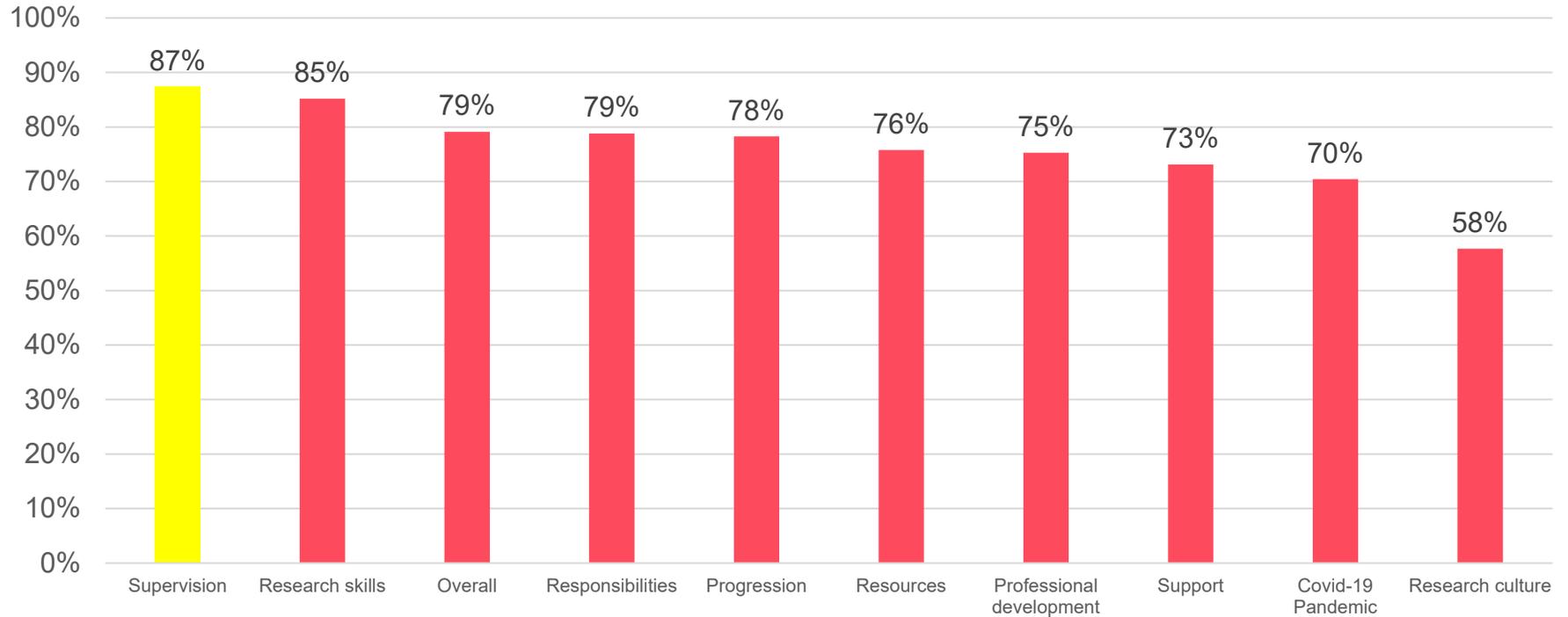
*Although my supervisory team sometimes make suggestions when a gap in skills or knowledge is identified, I mostly identify development needs myself and seek out the training I feel I require*

*My supervisors were helpful regarding identifying training needs during the start of my PhD, but this has diminished now as I am approaching the end of my studies*

*My supervisor is brilliant. They identify my needs and support me incredibly well*

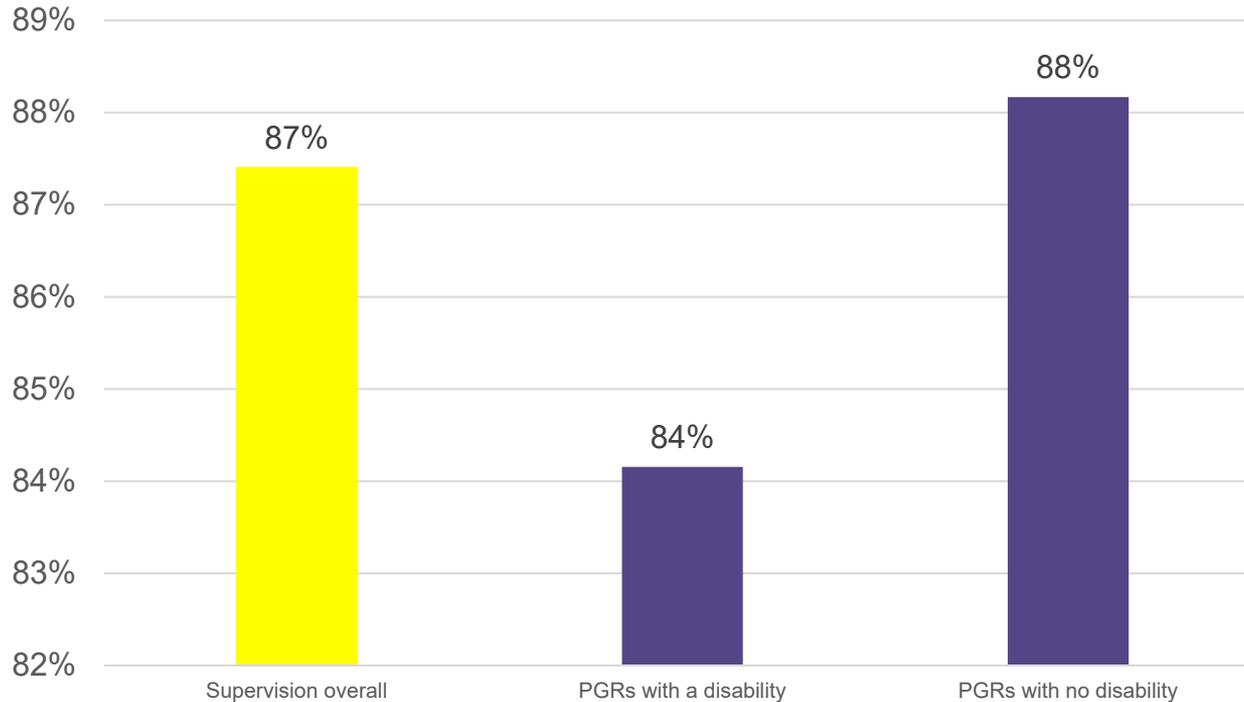
How does supervision compare with other elements of the postgraduate student experience?

# Supervision is the element of the postgraduate research degree experience with which PGRs are most satisfied



Which groups are more and less satisfied with their supervision?

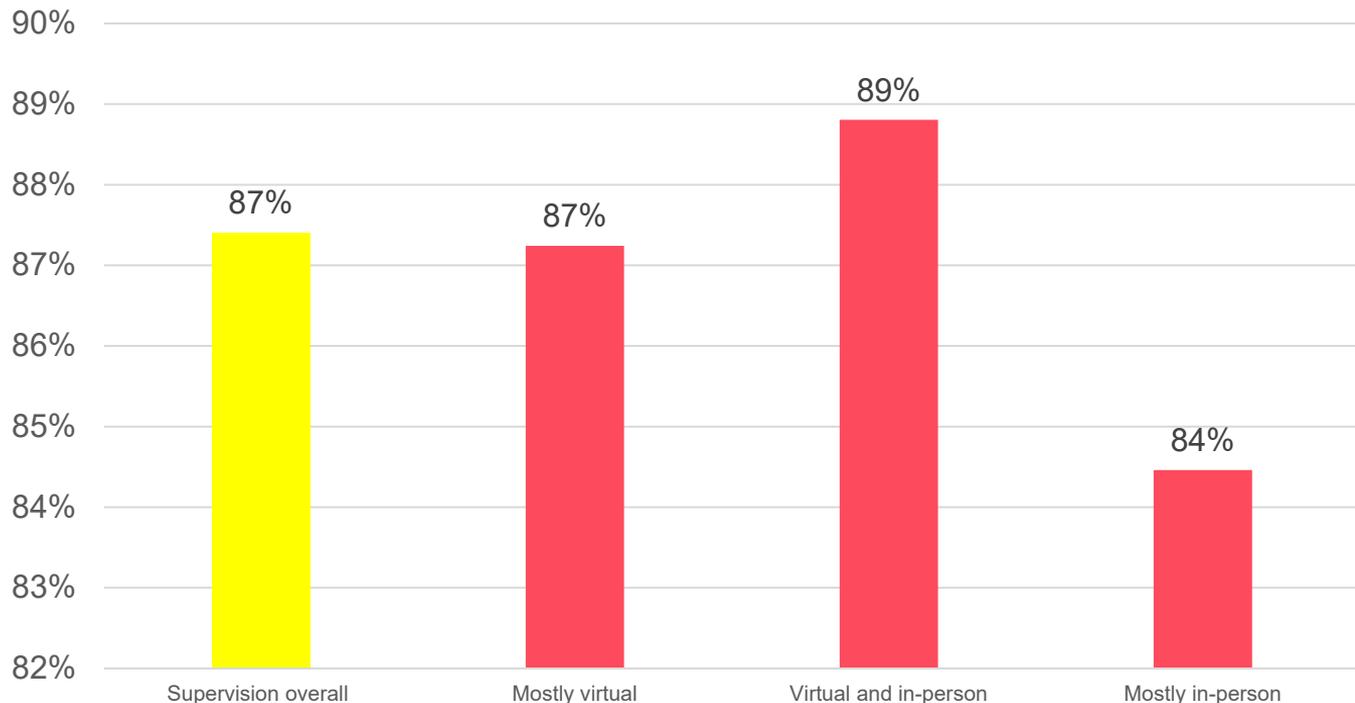
# PGRs with a disability or learning difference tend to be slightly less satisfied with their supervision than those with no disability



*My supervisor understands my learning needs and my disability. They seem very invested in my project as well*

*When I called my supervisor out for refusing my reasonable adjustments for disability, he continued to refuse them*

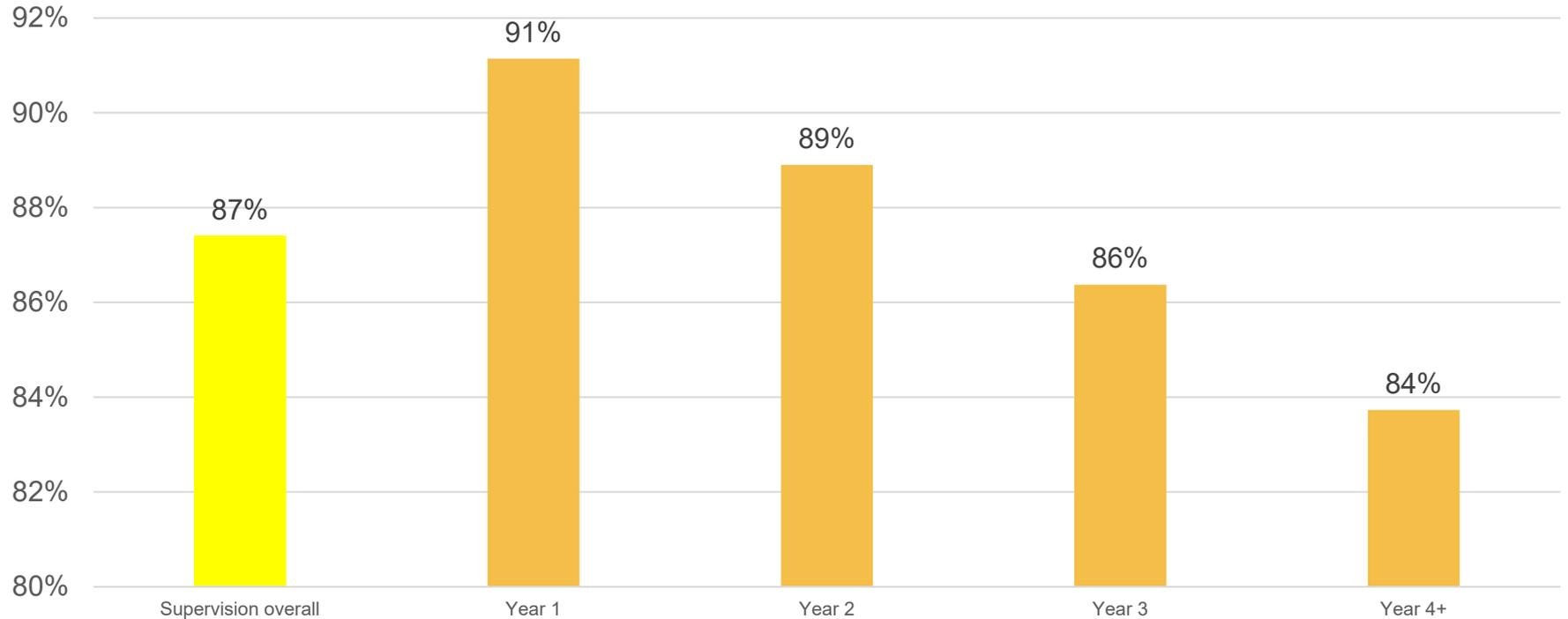
# PGRs who have had both virtual and in-person contact with university staff are most satisfied with their supervision



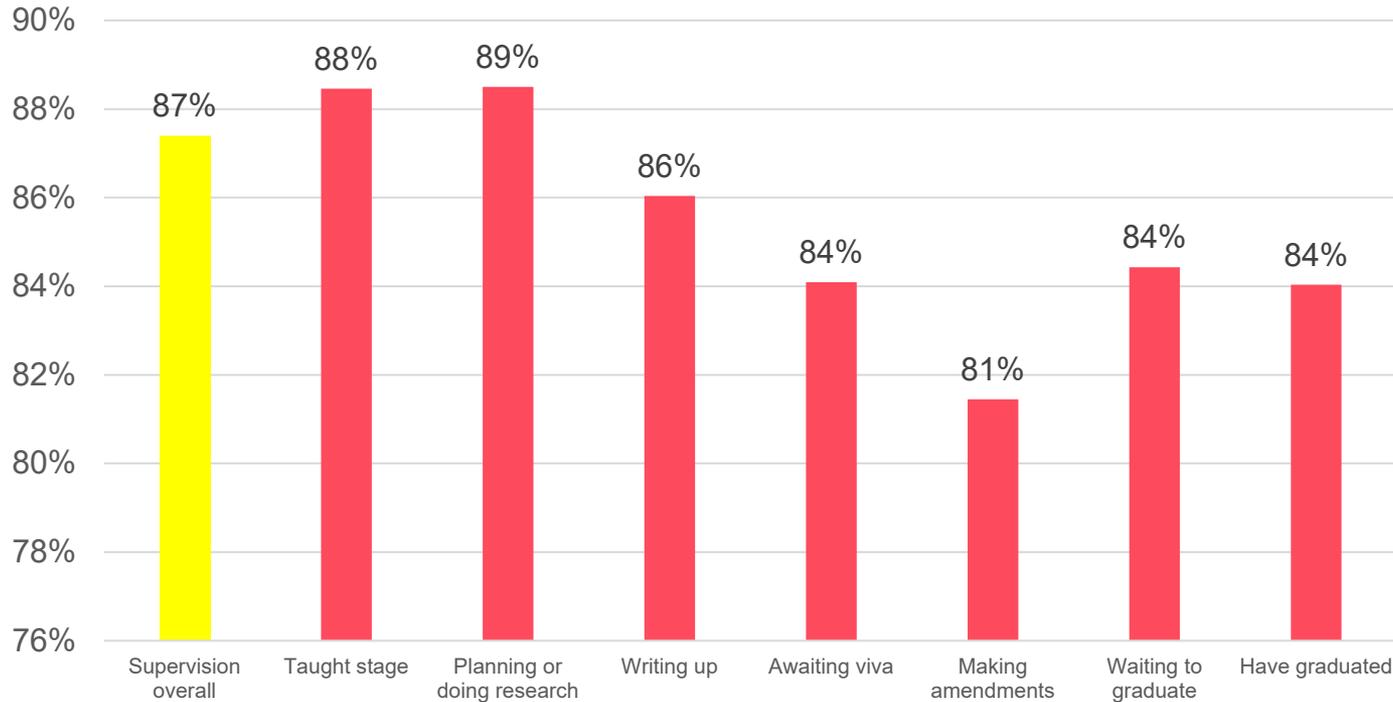
*Since everything has been online this year, I'm specially grateful for the constant support and 'normalcy' my supervisors have tried to create*

*I think that my supervisor has gone above and beyond to be there for me and guide me my first year despite not being able to meet in person*

# The further into their studies a PGR is, the less satisfied they tend to become with their research supervision



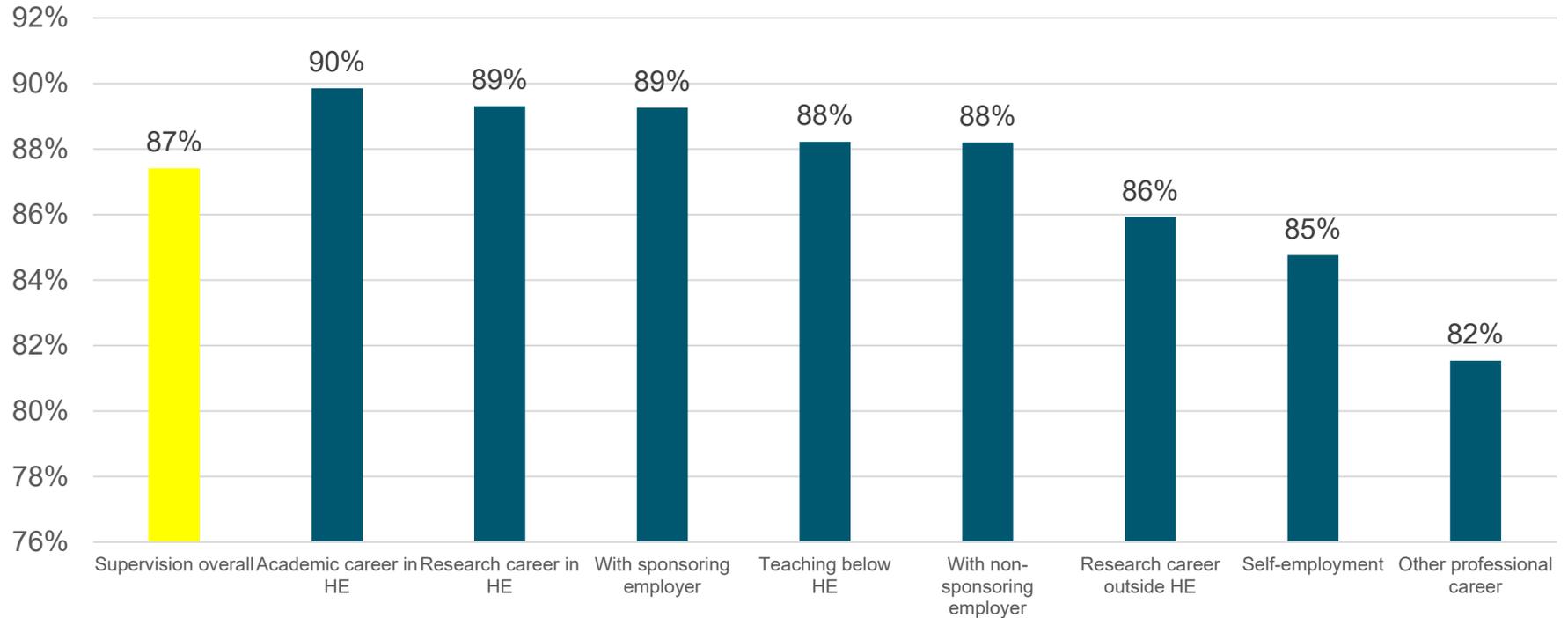
# PGRs at the planning and research phases of their studies tend to be most satisfied



*Especially in the finishing stage I would have welcomed more direct contact with my supervisors to prepare for my Viva*

*I found it very difficult to arrange meetings with my supervisors from my first year, even before Covid - and it worsened significantly from that point*

# PGRs who are planning on a career in HE are most satisfied with their supervision experience



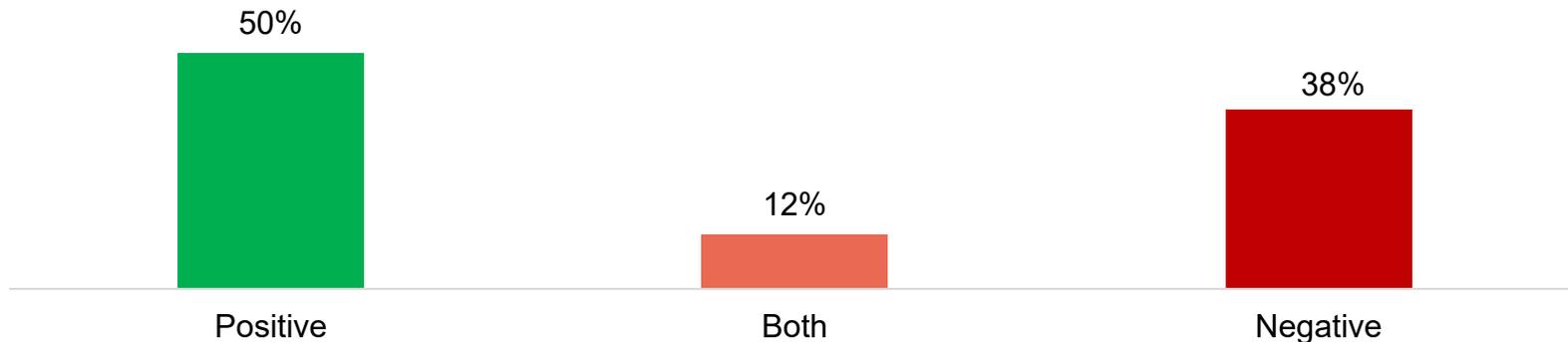
# In particular, those who are planning a professional career outside of research or teaching are less satisfied with supervisors' help to identify training needs



What can we learn about PGRs' perceptions about supervision from their open text responses?

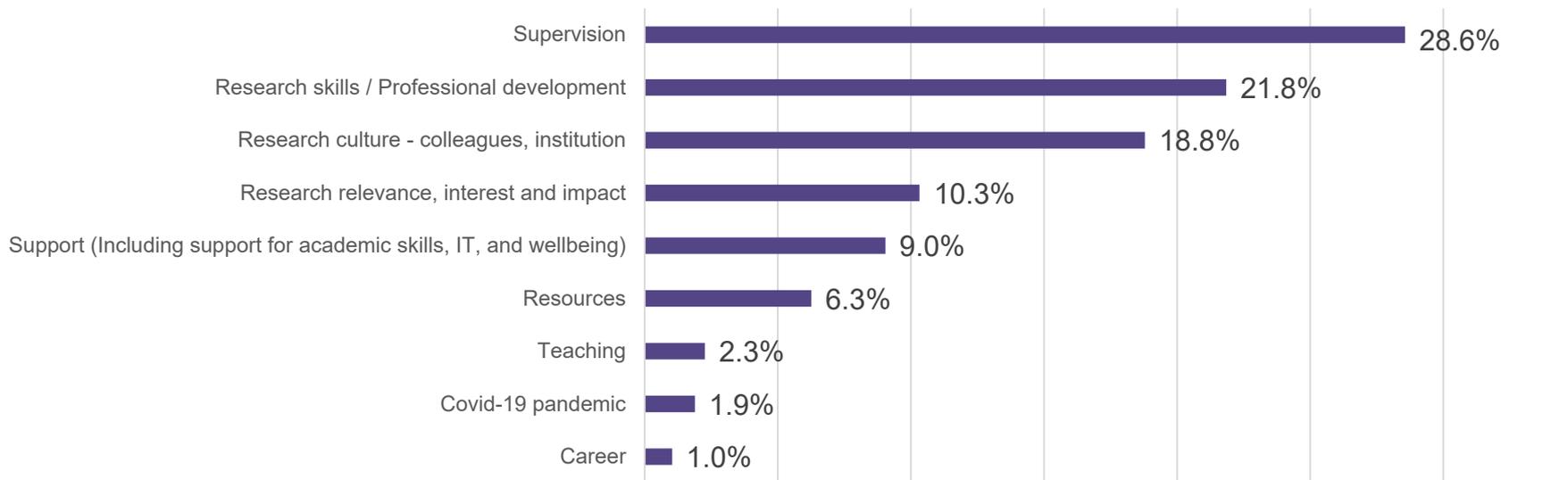
# When specifically asked to comment on supervision, half of PGRs responded positively and 12% left a mixed comment

Sentiment analysis on comments about supervision



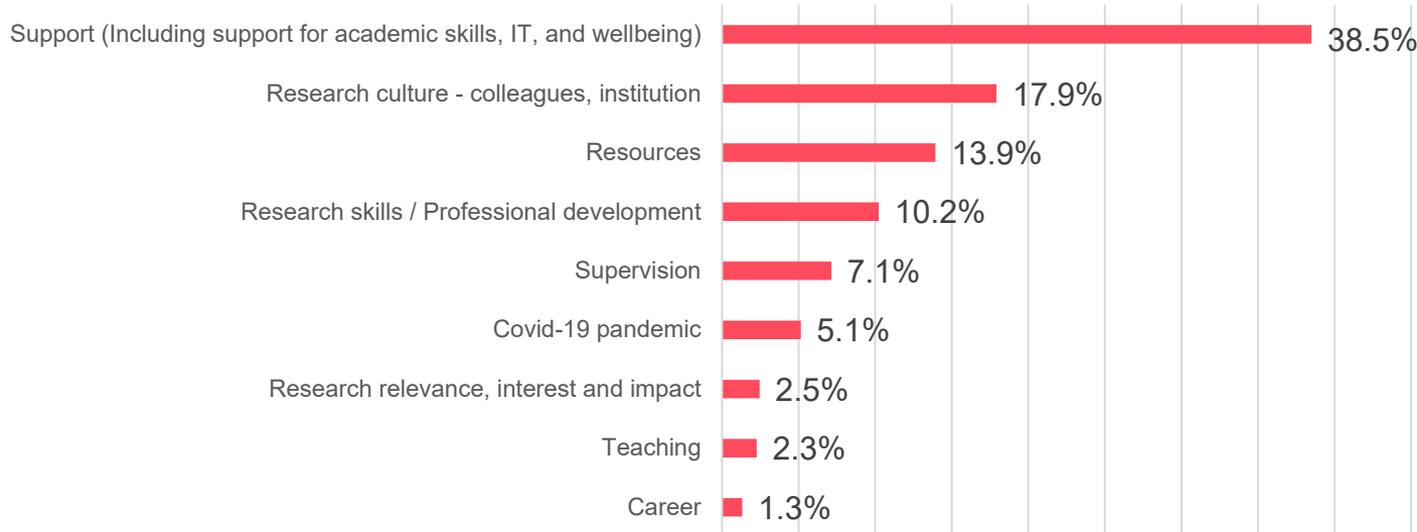
# Positively, supervision is the most common theme of positive comments about PGRs' programmes

What is the most positive aspect of your research degree programme so far?



# Although supervision is not frequently mentioned as a priority area for improvement, is there more supervisors can do to better support their PGRs?

One area in which your experience of research degree programme so far could be improved



*Even good supervisors have little knowledge of the college milestones and deadlines and no knowledge of what emotional and pastoral support is out there for students*

# Conclusions

# Conclusions

- Relative to other parts of the research degree experience, PGRs were satisfied with their supervision. In particular, PGRs were satisfied that their supervisors had the skills and knowledge needed to support their research.
- PGRs with disabilities or learning differences tended to be slightly less satisfied with their supervision, indicating the need to consider how we can better support PGRs with additional needs
- Perhaps surprisingly, PGRs who experienced both in-person and online contact with supervisors were most satisfied. The hybrid model of studying and working therefore seems successful in this respect.

## Conclusions (2)

- Satisfaction with supervision deteriorates as PGRs progress through their programme, although it does recover just before graduation. How can we ensure that PGRs continue to feel supported by their supervisors throughout their programme?
- Supervision is the most common theme of positive comments about PGRs' programmes, while support is the most common area noted as being a priority for improvement. Is there more that supervisors can do to signpost PGRs to the support they need?



**AdvanceHE**

Thank you

Any questions?