PRES 2018: WHAT DOES IT REALLY TELL US?

With the release of the 2018 PRES results the sector once again can examine the view of our doctoral candidates and consider how this reflects on provision and impacts on experience. Notably, this is the first year that institutions have had the option to run PRES annually, giving them more frequent opportunities to respond to the candidates’ feedback. However, the shift to annual surveying and the en bloc non-participation of Russell Group institutions has made analysis and interpretation of results more challenging.

To aid you in that analysis, this UKCGE Policy Briefing gives an overview of the stand out results and our view on those findings.

IMPACT OF ANNUAL REPORTING

The new option for universities to run annual PRES surveys provides them with more frequent opportunities to respond to candidate feedback. Yet while the numbers of respondents to this year’s first annual survey are sufficient for reliable analysis, the combination of annual and biennial engagement makes comparison more complex.

For example, 57,689 respondents from 90% of UK institutions (n=117) participated in the biennial survey in 2017, compared with 16,747 respondents from around 50% of institutions (n=66) in 2018.

As the report explains, the reduction in participating institutions partly reflected decisions by Russell Group universities, which tend to recruit larger numbers of postgraduate researchers, not to participate in the annual survey. Advance HE has taken steps to control for the impact of reduced numbers of Russell Group respondents by removing them from the overall satisfaction (page 8) and other comparisons.

Even though the 2017 and 2018 results are not directly comparable, we note several points of interest in the 2018 data, including the welcome engagement by three international universities.

We do not support the comparison with undergraduate satisfaction rates, however: as the report acknowledges, postgraduates embark on research degrees for diverse reasons, have entered research through different routes and a degree by research offers an entirely different experience from undergraduate study.

SATISFIED WITH SUPERVISION

Given the Council’s commitment to supervisor excellence, including sponsorship of the THE Research Supervisor of the Year award, we are delighted to see that the 86% satisfaction rate for ‘supervision and research skills’ recorded in 2017 and 2015 has been sustained. It is particularly encouraging to
note that supervision remains ‘consistently the highest scored scale since 2013’ and that over 90% of respondents continue to value highly their supervisors’ skills and knowledge, while satisfaction with the amount of contact with supervisors also remains fairly consistent (2018: 88%; 2017:89%).

However, it is disappointing to note that satisfaction with overall research culture remains low at 63%. The use of Pearson’s correlation coefficient to identify aspects of the experience that have most impact on student satisfaction is a welcome addition that encourages institutions to focus on research culture and how to act on feedback from postgraduate researchers.

INCONSISTANT EXPERIENCES, REDUCED OPPORTUNITIES

The wellbeing questions, introduced in 2017, are proving timely and pertinent. It is helpful to know that overall, around 75% of postgraduate researchers are satisfied with life and that around 80% believe their studies are worthwhile. While it is reassuring to see that the majority of UK-domiciled black students feel their programme is worthwhile, we are concerned to see evidence that disabled candidates are much less likely to be satisfied with their experience.

We are also concerned to note that in 2018 even fewer postgraduate researchers have had opportunities to teach during their programme. Teaching can increase development of numerous transferable skills and a lack of pedagogical opportunities puts UK research graduates at a potential disadvantage when compared with post-doctoral researchers from other countries, some of whom routinely experience teaching during their degrees.

MANAGING CANDIDATES EXPECTATIONS

Our final comment is on general levels of satisfaction, which are shown to fall as postgraduate researchers progress. We suggest that there are complex reasons for this, including the intellectual demands on candidates as they develop independent research competence and are challenged by the research experience, which may not evolve as they had expected, the nature of research being in itself uncertain. It would be useful to explore this theme further and to unpack the reasons for the decline in satisfaction over time.

[ENDS]

If you would like to comment on this or any other development in postgraduate education, please write to our Director at: owen.gower@ukcge.ac.uk