

**RH** | ROYAL  
**SU** | HOLLOWAY  
STUDENTS'  
UNION

# STUDENT VOICE REPORT

**THE POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH  
STUDENT EXPERIENCE**

ROYAL  
HOLLOWAY  
UNIVERSITY  
of LONDON

# Contents.

---

<b>Foreword.</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Executive Summary.</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Section A: The Context.</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Section B: Methodology.</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Section C: Findings.</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Recommendations.</b>	<b>46</b>
<b>Appendices.</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Works Cited.</b>	<b>56</b>

# Foreword.

---

## **Jack O'Neill, Students' Union President**

Students' unions have historically been seen as undergraduate-centric institutions and we at Royal Holloway are not an exception to this perception. Our mission is simple: we are here to make student life better and this means for all students, from all levels, from all backgrounds, and from all methods of study. However, we have not always provided this same level of service to postgraduate research (PGR) students.

Postgraduate research students form an essential part of the Royal Holloway community. They are still on their educational journey, they further the research excellence at this institution and, for some, are incredibly valued teachers who have a strong impact on other Royal Holloway students. Up until now, the problem has been that we as a Students' Union have not understood enough about the ways we could help improve the lives of postgraduate research students during their time at Royal Holloway. Elected Officers are typically from an undergraduate background, influenced by our own experiences and motivated to solve issues that are most visible. This, along with numerous other reasons, has meant that we have not been in a position to support PGR students the way we would have liked.

When running for office, I was eager to ensure that our work has an impact on all students, but I wasn't sure where to start when considering what could be done for PGR students. Sure, there were some areas that were more obvious than others, but it was largely unknown territory. Through some incredible commitment from PGR students who participated in the project, this Policy Inquiry explores the issues which impact, both positively and negatively, the research student experience at Royal Holloway.

I hope that the engagement that has begun through this research, and indeed this paper itself, is a sign of things to come in our work here at Royal Holloway. Thanks to all those that have engaged in creating this, and I hope it enables more to engage in the future.

## **Mengli Fang, Charlotte Gauthier, Stephen Holmes & Shanika Ranasinghe PGR Collective Convenors**

It is easy to see why PGR students have been underrepresented historically within the Students' Union. PGR students play multiple roles within the College: we are not only students, but sometimes teachers and examiners too. Consequently, we are often misunderstood or not given the priority of undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate taught (PGT) students by the College or Students' Union. Additionally, the links between PGR students are rather loose: we are sparsely distributed across various departments, doing highly individual research projects. Furthermore, the mechanisms for evaluating the PGR experience are less concrete than for undergraduates. In the UK, most PGR students do not attend compulsory courses - they mostly work closely with their supervisors, who are not held properly accountable by the College. This leads to very subjective processes and outcomes for each PGR student.

All these factors make any problems in the PGR experience more easily hidden. We as a community face some issues that would never occur for undergraduates, yet sometimes we are taken less seriously because those being impacted are smaller in number and thus more isolated. As much of the College signposting is tailored towards undergraduates, it can be hard to know where to turn when times get tough. Whilst this is somewhat understandable, it does not mean our rights as students should be ignored. It does not mean that change is not needed.

Change only comes about when we speak up; it is therefore important for us to build connections and form a community, to make our voices heard. As your elected PGR Collective Convenors, we welcome the movements made by the SU to better understand the PGR experience. This Student Voice Report is hopefully just the first of many steps to represent and advocate for the PGR community going forward. Although there is much work to be done, we are happy to be part of this process and to see that the tide is slowly turning. We sincerely hope that the recommendations will be upheld to improve the overall student experience for all PGR students, who make a unique and valuable contribution to both the student and research communities on campus.

# Executive Summary.

---

In May 2019, the Students' Union launched a Policy Inquiry on the postgraduate research student experience at Royal Holloway. This Student Voice Report marks the culmination of our efforts to engage with the postgraduate research community over the past ten months. It presents an in-depth analysis of our ongoing discussions with students, and highlights both their positive and negative experiences at Royal Holloway while undertaking a research degree. Moreover, as Policy Inquiries are raised with the aim to bring about change, this report additionally lists recommendations framed around issues of key importance for both the University and the Students' Union with the hope they have significant and long-term positive impact on current and prospective postgraduate research students at Royal Holloway.

Below are a summarised list of recommendations, which can be found in full at the end of the document.

- 1.1** The University should conduct a full, comprehensive review of the PGR space on both the Egham and Bedford Square campus.
- 1.2** The University should increase the number of lockers in the Research Postgraduate Library Space in the EWD building.
- 1.3** The University and Doctoral School should improve signposting information about accessing library resources at Senate House online.
- 1.4** The University should extend opening hours for commercial services during the periods outside of undergraduate term time.
- 2.1** The University and the Doctoral School should provide coherent and easily accessible information regarding research student progression and attainment.
- 2.2** The University should update the content on their website which links to University services so that it is tailored more towards postgraduate research students.
- 2.3** The University and Doctoral School should increase the flexibility of induction talks for postgraduate research students.

- 2.4** The University and Doctoral School should consider implementing separate induction talks for MRes students.
- 2.5** The University and the Doctoral school should signpost whether information and training talks are relevant to MRes students.
- 2.6** The University should improve the provision of online training resources on either Moodle or the Doctoral School website.
- 2.7** The University should allow international postgraduate research students the opportunity to access the same University support services like EDC and CeDas.
- 2.8** The University should provide full transparency on where the £400 writing-up fee is spent and provide an official document which clarifies this information to students.
- 2.9** The University should work alongside the individual Schools or departments and re-introduce 'Roundtable Days'.
- 2.10** The University should create a clear, accessible and coherent delegation of responsibilities between Doctoral School and academic units (Schools and departments).
- 3.1** The University should create a consistent and transparent process across Schools and departments in the specific instance when a supervisor leaves the University.
- 3.2** The University should provide clarification and enable an understanding about the difference between a supervisor and an advisor.
- 3.3** The University should introduce clear information on the College and Doctoral School website which explains the research student-supervisor professional relationship.
- 3.4** The University should clarify the process for reporting a complaint relating to supervisor misconduct and make this information easily accessible.
- 4.1** The University should provide mental health training to all members of academic staff involved in supervisor roles.
- 4.2** The University should provide online resources with coherent and relevant information about mental health and the research degree.
- 4.3** The University, the Doctoral School and departments should run coordinated events which focus on the pressures of undertaking a research degree.
- 4.4** The University Wellbeing Services should create a separate strand of service for postgraduate research students.
- 5.1** The University Careers Service should run a Postgraduate Research Degree Careers Fair every year, with both academic and non-academic opportunities present.
- 5.2** The University Careers Service should work alongside the Doctoral School and offer more sessions specifically tailored for postgraduate research students.

- 5.3** The Doctoral School should include more talks about career opportunities within the Research Development Programme and uploaded the content online.
- 5.4** The University and the Doctoral School should update the content on the website about career opportunities after completing the research degree.
- 6.1** The Students' Union should expand opening hours on services out of the traditional undergraduate term time.
- 6.2** The Students' Union should host a greater number of mature events for postgraduate research students, and should contribute towards a more coordinated events programme between the University, departments and the Doctoral School.
- 6.3** The Students' Union should increase outreach on research student issues and offer more support for students.
- 6.4** The Students' Union should consider the current level of involvement and should further encourage postgraduate research students to become more involved in student groups.
- 6.5** The Students' Union should undertake a review alongside the Postgraduate Research Student Collective as to whether the current Academic Rep system works for PGR students.

# Section A: The Context.

---

## A1. Overview.

When President Jack O'Neill and the Officer Group voted on the decision to open a Policy Inquiry on the postgraduate research student experience, the Students' Union knew there was a lot of work to be done. Historically, our engagement with postgraduate researchers has been low, but since launching this Policy Inquiry in May, the Students' Union has gained a huge amount of insight. We learned, for example, the majority of doctoral students are generally happy with supervision and they feel supported in their research. Additionally, the introduction of the Research Postgraduate Library Room has had a positive impact on students' ability to work productively in a space that is exclusively their own. Students also highlighted the autumn induction and training talks were extremely helpful, however, students who start later in the year miss out on these opportunities and are forced to wait on average more than six months to access this information. Other issues raised were the lack of services and opening hours out of term time when postgraduate researchers are still very much on campus. Finally, a large majority of students emphasised the need for more mental health support from the University's Wellbeing services, departments and the Doctoral School. The above examples are only a small sample of responses given by current students, and the subsequent sections of this report will further examine what is currently working for research students at Royal Holloway as well as what is not.

It is important to note our Policy Inquiry did not focus solely on the students' relationship with the University. The purpose of the Students' Union is to represent students' views and our mission is simple: to make their life better while undertaking a degree at Royal Holloway. This project offered us the chance to learn more about how postgraduate researchers view our role during their degree. Primarily, we discovered they have mixed feelings about the level of involvement the Students' Union should have with the research student community. Some believe we are very much an undergraduate service provider and should remain so. Others mentioned they would like to see more coordinated services and events from us, perhaps, in

partnership with the University and the Doctoral School. A lot of students admitted they did not know what type of role the Students' Union should play in their degree, or had little knowledge about the kinds of services beyond club nights and sports we provide, such as the Advice Centre. Importantly, though, there was a consensus among research students we engaged with that this project was a welcome change to our previous, non-existent relationship. Many were pleased to see the Students' Union take the first step towards better representation of postgraduate research students on campus.

As an organisation, our ability to act as a platform for change and project the collective voice of students is our most valuable contribution to the student body, and we were not providing this same level of service to postgraduates as we were to undergraduates. We appreciate the time students took out of their research and teaching hours to speak with us and complete our survey, for it allowed us the opportunity to finally embrace that role and represent your voice in this report.

## **A2. Postgraduate Student Voice.**

In the early stages of our research, we learned that postgraduate research students across the UK feel like their voices are being ignored by their higher education institute and education policy makers who, instead, repeatedly focus their attention on the undergraduate population. In their report, *Postgraduate Education (2012)*, the Higher Education Commission wrote:

For too long postgraduate education has been the forgotten part of the sector, notable in press and parliamentary debate only by its absence. It is a policy lacuna - stranded midway between undergraduate-centred education policy and policy on research development. Some of the biggest and most difficult issues facing the sector have not been confronted and have been allowed to linger.<sup>1</sup>

Eight years later and this still remains the case as reaffirmed by current postgraduate students at Royal Holloway. One student who participated in our October focus group argued, 'The University runs an undergraduate-centric business model' and they further maintained 'there needs to be more investment in PhD students'. Another student wrote in our survey they 'feel that the uni has been more focused on undergraduate study and that postgrads especially PhD students are often overlooked'. A third student described their experience as a member of a student-staff committee in our survey, and how they felt completely ignored during meetings: 'Everything we said was rejected, it was just a formality'. These are only

---

<sup>1</sup> The Higher Education Commission, *Postgraduate Education - An Inquiry by the Higher Education Commission, (Autumn 2012)* <<https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/hec/research/report-postgraduate-education>> [accessed 20 June 2019] (p. 17).

a few examples of many where postgraduate research students explained how they felt the University, and especially University services, value feedback from undergraduates over postgraduates. It was disheartening to learn that research students attempted to lobby their departments or the University for improvements, but were repeatedly unsuccessful in their endeavours and we hope this report will help change this narrative.

We were curious if this feeling of being disregarded was a recent consequence of the University's academic restructure or a more enduring issue for postgraduate research students. We looked back through the University Postgraduate Research Student Experience Survey (PRES) analysis from the last three academic years to learn how student voice was measured and where Royal Holloway ranked within the sector. The PRES is comprised of 31 closed five-point Likert scale questions and ten optional open text questions. The survey has seven main question areas: supervision, progression, research culture, responsibilities, professional development, resources and research skills. These sections are combined to rate postgraduate researchers' overall satisfaction. Besides the core seven question sections, postgraduate research students are also asked to comment on the following additional topics: teaching opportunities, wellbeing, motivation, career aspirations, language skills, current employment and any intention to leave their studies.

On the whole, student feedback has always scored low in the PRES – both across the sector and at Royal Holloway. In contrast to the National Student Survey (NSS) which includes four questions about student voice and feedback during the undergraduate degree, the PRES only asks postgraduate researchers if they agree with a single question: 'My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students'. In the 2019 survey, the lowest satisfaction rating for Royal Holloway was this question.<sup>2</sup> The chart below details how Royal Holloway has ranked in comparison with the UK sector for this question since 2017, and the % agree is a sum of the percentage of students who selected "mostly agree" or "definitely agree".

<b>Year</b>	<b>RHUL % Agree</b>	<b>UK Sector % Agree</b>	<b>Difference</b>
2017	64.4	61.8	2.6
2018	55	60	-5
2019	54	59	-5

Table 1: Student response to question 10.1, 2019 PRES

<sup>2</sup> All PRES sector and institutional analysis and students' open comments cited in this report for 2017, 2018 and 2019 were provided by the Royal Holloway University of London Strategic Planning and Change team in their University PRES Briefing Documents.

Since 2017, Royal Holloway has seen a drop of over ten percentage points, with students in some departments ranking the university more than 40 per cent below the sector average. The table above also shows the sector average has steadily decreased in the last three years, which indicates this is not solely an institutional issue, and more work needs to be done to improve feedback mechanisms across the sector for postgraduate research students. The PRES survey only asks a rather broad question about how Royal Holloway as an institution values and responds to postgraduate research student feedback. Survey respondents can interpret this question differently – some might answer specifically about their experiences with their department whereas others could base their answer on the University's response to feedback. The Students' Union read the open comments to get a clearer understanding about students' interpretation of this question.

*'My department values our feedback, it feels like the college does not though'.  
PRES 2019*

*'I don't feel there are any feedback mechanisms relevant to my experience as a mature student. I assume this is because I am in so tiny a minority that my views are immaterial'. PRES 2018*

*'I think the institution values comments from students but I have not seen clear evidence they respond to feedback'. PRES 2017*

Obviously each department is different and some will respond better to feedback than others, but there appears to be a consistency of poor response at the institution level. In their 2018 briefing on the PRES analysis, the University admitted 'there is room for improvement in satisfaction for Royal Holloway students feeling that their feedback is valued and acted upon'.<sup>3</sup> The low score for the 2019 PRES indicates there hasn't been much movement in this particular area.

When comparing undergraduates' opinions with postgraduate researchers about how the University responds to their feedback, there is a marked difference. The NSS is considered a valuable source of public information about the current state of undergraduate higher education in the UK through student feedback, and heavily impacts shortlisting university league tables. This level of influence consequently gives undergraduates 'a powerful collective voice to help shape the future of their course and their university/college for current and prospective students'.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, because institutional results are made public, the NSS places pressure on a university to perform well. It also has the potential to shape

<sup>3</sup> Royal Holloway University of London, '2018 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) Results', <<https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/restricted/contensis/iquad/strategicplanning/documents/pdf/pres/2018-pres-analysis-v3.pdf>> [accessed 4 June 2019], (p. 14).

<sup>4</sup> About the NSS', <<https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/about.php#:~:targetText=Aimed%20at%20mainly%20final%2Dyear,course%20at%20their%20university%2Fcollege>> [accessed 15 August 2019] (p<sup>4</sup> About the NSS', <<https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/about.php#:~:targetText=Aimed%20at%20mainly%20final%2Dyear,course%20at%20their%20university%2Fcollege>> [accessed 15 August 2019] (para. 1 of 10).ara. 1 of 10).

how education policy is written across the sector as well as at an institutional-level. The four questions used to measure student voice in the NSS are listed in the table below.

<b>23.</b>	I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course.
<b>24.</b>	Staff value students' views and opinions about the course.
<b>25.</b>	It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.
<b>26.</b>	The Students' Union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic needs.

Table 2: NSS Questions, Student Voice

One immediately notices the different language and level of detail in the NSS questions compared to the PRES. Each question targets a specific element of feedback – opportunities, staff engagement and their response to the feedback. Another important difference is the reference to the Students' Union specifically. This question highlights an additional level of support undergraduates have to lobby their department and the University for change if they feel their feedback is not being heard. Postgraduate researchers have not previously considered the Students' Union an ally in this way. It is therefore unsurprising that, since 2017, third-year undergraduate students have ranked Royal Holloway considerably higher than postgraduate research students in regards to whether they feel the institution values and responds to student feedback. Moreover, undergraduates have consistently ranked the University above the sector in this regards, and in 2019 Royal Holloway overall score for feedback was 3.46 percentage points above the sector.

The positive NSS scores clearly indicate that undergraduates are pleased with the feedback mechanisms in place. While the NSS questions are not an equal comparison to the PRES, there is one question which has similar phrasing to the PRES: 'Staff value students' views and opinions about the course'. The table below shows the percentage of undergraduates who agree with this statement over the last three years.

<b>Year</b>	<b>RHUL % Agree</b>	<b>UK Sector % Agree</b>	<b>Difference</b>
2017	77.53	75.55	1.98
2018	76.77	75.43	1.34
2019	77.53	75.52	2.01

Table 3: Student responses to NSS question 24, 2017-19

Comparing results, it is hardly unsurprising to understand why postgraduate research students feel invisible to the University. The percentage of postgraduate research students who agreed in the PRES was markedly lower than undergraduates.

In 2017 it was 13.13 percentage points lower, 21.77 in 2018 and, finally, 23.53 percentage points in 2019. This feeling of being overlooked is further exacerbated by the fact that Royal Holloway rose five places in the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide and was awarded the title 'Top 20 UK University' in 2019. The University's rank at number nineteen additionally meant Royal Holloway was shortlisted for University of the Year 2020. This is a laudable achievement that deserves recognition, but the shortlisting process is weighted heavily on the University's performance in the NSS. They also take into account degree results, employment prospects and course completion rates. These results are, again, based entirely on undergraduate attainment. While the Students' Union is not trying to discount this accomplishment, it does need to be mentioned that The Times and Sunday Times Good University rankings does not present a complete picture of the Royal Holloway student experience.

In truth, the postgraduate research experience is vastly different to the undergraduate one, and we can appreciate the difficulty it would require to create a ranking system which encompasses the entire student population at Royal Holloway. Postgraduate research students make up around 10 per cent of the student population at Royal Holloway. Unlike undergraduate students who are grouped together on the same course, research students often work alone within their respective departments on their niche thesis topics. Moreover, the lack of community within the postgraduate research population make it difficult to voice their feedback as a group.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, the PRES is one vehicle which represents research students' collective voice about their student experiences. While sector analysis is reported publically, institutional PRES data is not and this is possibly a reason why it does not subsequently carry the same weight as the NSS or have the same level of influence over education policy, reinforcing the shared perception among many postgraduate research students who feel like higher education institutes do not value feedback from this community of students.

When examining Royal Holloway's PRES briefings and open comments for the last three years we noticed a decline not only with student feedback but with their overall experience. The table below details how Royal Holloway postgraduate research students scored their overall experience of undertaking a research degree compared with the UK sector since 2017.

<b>Year</b>	<b>RHUL % Agree</b>	<b>UK Sector % Agree</b>	<b>Difference</b>
2017	84.6	81.9	2.7
2018	83	80	3
2019	81	81	0

*Table 4: Student responses on the overall experience of the research degree, PRES 2017-19*

<sup>5</sup> The Students' Union recognises this community of students are underrepresented on campus and in the Students' Union, and it is why we created the Postgraduate Research Student Collective following the constitution referendum and Democracy Review.

While this report will not give an in-depth analysis of the PRES results for each question, it is worth repeating the Royal Holloway summary rankings for 2019. Last year, the survey was open from 18 February to 17 May and was distributed to 1042 students. In total, 359 completed the survey, resulting in a 34 per cent response rate. Departments need a minimum of ten respondents to have their results included at the department-level in the final analysis.<sup>6</sup> The 2019 PRES saw 103 higher education institutes included in the sector-wide results and the table below explains how Royal Holloway compared in 2019.

<b>Question Area</b>	<b>RHUL Rank</b>	<b>Quarter</b>
Overall	45	Second quarter
Supervision	36	Second quarter
Progression	52	Second quarter
Research culture	56	Third quarter
Responsibilities	65	Third quarter
Professional development	75	Third quarter
Resources	81	Lowest quarter
Research skills	90	Lowest quarter

Table 5: Royal Holloway summary rankings compared to sector, PRES 2019

Despite the accolades Royal Holloway received last year, the table reveals it does not translate into the postgraduate research student experience. Many of the PRES satisfaction trends were repeated in our own survey – students are satisfied with supervision, resources at Royal Holloway needs improvement, and students feel like they do not receive enough training to improve their research skills. However, as our survey was based entirely on free text answers, we were given much more qualitative data to analyse than the PRES analysis and it allowed us to gain further insight into our satisfaction rates.

<sup>6</sup> Electrical Engineering, Media Arts and Social Work were the only departments which did not have their results shared in the RHUL 2019 PRES Briefing document.

# Section B:

# Methodology.

---

The Policy Inquiry on the Royal Holloway postgraduate research student experience has been an ongoing process for ten months. Our knowledge surrounding the research experience at the start of the project was minimal, and the first phase of our project began immediately after the constitution referendum. We knew we owed it to our postgraduate researchers to educate ourselves further about the key issues impacting doctoral students at the national level in order to better understand and frame our discussion with current students about their own experiences at Royal Holloway.

In September we published our findings in a briefing document, Policy Inquiry: The Postgraduate Experience (2019). In the paper we identified five sector-wide issues: funding, widening participation, internationalisation and the UK doctorate, mental health and wellbeing and, finally, employability and career development. While we were curious as to whether these issues would resonate with current students at Royal Holloway, we were aware these topics would not define our project nor the subsequent recommendations. The briefing document was published on the SU website. In addition, the SU President specifically reached out to postgraduate researchers and emailed them about the next steps of the Policy Inquiry and included a copy of the document. This was done for two reasons. Firstly, the Students' Union is not entirely sure how often postgraduate students visit our website, and there was a good chance many would never see the briefing document and not know anything about our project. The second reason was on a more personal note as we had a question to ask research students: 'If you could change one thing about your experience, what would it be?'

This question signalled the shift into the second phase of our Policy Inquiry, which was based entirely around engagement and discussion with research students to hear first-hand about their experiences at Royal Holloway. 15 students responded through email to this initial question, which was more engagement than we have ever had with postgraduate researchers in the past. We continued building momentum around the Policy Inquiry and ran a focus group session for postgraduate researchers, met with individual students and attended PGR coffee

mornings run by the Doctoral School in October and November. These formal and informal events helped us initiate a dialogue with postgraduate researchers like never before. Their openness and willingness to share their thoughts on both the positive and negative elements of the Royal Holloway research degree highlighted pressing issues and helped us begin the process of identifying potential solutions that would improve their experience. Furthermore, their answers helped shape the questions we asked in a final survey sent out to all postgraduate researchers at the end of October.

Our Postgraduate Research Student Experience Survey signalled the end of the second phase of the Policy Inquiry. It was composed of 15 questions and posted on Survey Monkey for a two-week period. 186 students completed the survey, which is 15.5 per cent of the current postgraduate research population at Royal Holloway.<sup>7</sup> All questions were composed as free text responses. We asked students to provide us with their student number, but this was only used to check whether they were currently enrolled at the University and for the survey prize draw. All student numbers were subsequently deleted following these preliminary checks, and before we began analysis of their responses. All information provided by students from our in-person discussion sessions as well as the survey is cited anonymously in this final report.

The process of identifying solutions and composing recommendations for the University began upon completion of the qualitative analysis of the in-person and survey responses. The Students' Union additionally tracked trends with raised issues by comparing our results with PRES data, open comment responses and sector-wide analysis for 2017, 2018 and 2019. Suggested recommendations were then sent to the PGR Collective convenors for further discussion, and the Students' Union ran a final deliberative event in January 2020 which was attended by six PhD students and one MRes student for further discussion. Our total engagement for the entire project was 217 students which is 18.2 per cent of the postgraduate research student population.

---

<sup>7</sup>At the time of this report, there are 1188 postgraduate research students enrolled at the University and undertaking their writing-up year. Data provided by the Royal Holloway University of London Strategic Planning and Change team.

# Section C: Findings.

---

## C1. Overview.

---

The subsequent sections of this report will discuss the following topics in further detail: supervision, resources and research community, mental health, employability and the Royal Holloway Careers Service, and what role the Students' Union should play in the research student experience.

## C2. Supervision.

---

Supervision has remained one area of the postgraduate research experience where satisfaction rates remain above the sector average in the PRES. As mentioned, Royal Holloway was ranked in the second quarter with a supervision score of 36 for last year's survey. The Higher Education Academy measures supervision across four questions in the PRES which are listed in the table below.

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| <b>2.1.</b> | My supervisor/s have the skills and subject knowledge to support my research.          |
| <b>2.2.</b> | I have regular contact with my supervisor/s appropriate for my needs.                  |
| <b>2.3.</b> | My supervisor/s provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities.          |
| <b>2.4.</b> | My supervisor/s help me to identify my training and development needs as a researcher. |

Table 6: Supervision questions, PRES

In contrast to the single question about student feedback, this section of the PRES examines in greater detail students' experience of supervision during the research degree. Moreover, the phrasing of each question alludes to other sections of the survey, like research skills, professional development and progression. These are all important elements of the research student lifecycle which supervisors should be involved with, and many students tie these themes together when discussing their supervisory relationship in the open comment section of the PRES. This allowed us to gain better insight into the nuances of this aspect of the degree. The table below presents the combined average of the above four supervision questions.

Year	RHUL % Agree	UK Sector % Agree	Difference
2017	88.9	85.8	3.1
2018	87	85.6	1.4
2019	87.6	86.2	1.4

Table 7: Overall student responses to the supervision section of the PRES, 2017-19

When creating our own survey for this Policy Inquiry we were very much aware that we did not want to repeat the same questions in the PRES survey. With supervision, however, we knew some questions would be reproduced, although we hoped the wording of our questions and the free text only response option would give students an opportunity to further elaborate on their experiences with their supervisor/s in more detail. The table below lists the three questions we included in our survey about supervision.

How frequently do you contact/meet with your supervisor/s? Do you feel like they make themselves available to discuss your research?
Do you feel like your supervisor is invested in your research advancement? Please explain how.
Have you encountered problems or difficulties with your supervisor/s, whether personal or professional? If so, did you report any issues to the College?

Table 8: Supervision questions, Students' Union PGR Student Experience Survey, 2019

Like the PRES, a high majority of students answered they have a good professional relationship with their supervisors. The reported frequency of meetings varied among students we spoke to at our deliberate events and in the survey. Some admitted they spoke with their supervisors every day – in person or through other forms of communication – while others scheduled regular meetings on a weekly or monthly basis. Students who disclosed that their contact with supervisors occurred less frequently, for example every few weeks or months, mentioned they often spoke with their supervisors during these longer stretches through email, telephone, Skype or text messages, and they were satisfied these alternative methods met their research needs.

*Definitely, as a PhD student contact with my supervisor is the most important part for my research. My supervisor is always available and [we] speak very often, sometimes more than once per week.*

*We meet on a regular basis and in contact via email very regularly. They are fully available. Without a doubt they have given me more support than they*

*are contracted to and I am forever grateful for how good they have been to me thus far!*

In our analysis we found it was common for students to mention the frequency of their contact with supervisors was dependent on their current stage of research. Many students mentioned they met their supervisors more regularly at the start and near the end of their degree.

*At the start of my PhD I met supervisors every month, then we moved to a little less frequency as I grew more independent - maybe every couple of months - and then back to more frequently as I was finishing. I always felt like they made themselves available and never felt I was without support.*

Only six per cent of survey respondents reported low satisfaction with how often they had contact with their supervisors. There were isolated incidents where this was the result of insufficient or, in a handful of cases, no contact at all with their supervisors.

*I haven't met my supervisor yet - I'm a block mode student so this is the one area that I think could be improved. I'd really like regular telephone tutorials with my supervisor/personal tutor to discuss progress, personal development, research and so on.*

In some cases, students mentioned outside factors which impacted their ability to have more regular contact, often citing their supervisor's academic workload and administrative duties as a reason for not scheduling more regular meetings. Research students are very much aware that their supervisors are spread thin from working long hours and across many courses, but students' guilt about being a burden to their supervisors subsequently impacts their own work-life balance and can slow down their progress.

*Varies with different supervisors, some come across much busier than others and as PhDs we can see their workload stresses them out so we don't want to feel like a nuisance. Department requires a meeting for our logs every month.*

*Probably just over once a month, depending on what deadlines/conferences I have. I think it is sometimes hard to get time to discuss my research more informally, as they have so many other administrative burdens. It can feel like we haven't discussed research plans for <6 months at times.*

Interestingly, there were instances where students decided to use the survey and focus group opportunities as a platform to discuss situations where other research students were not receiving the same level of support from their supervisor/s they were themselves receiving. It was quite a common occurrence throughout our in-person discussion events and in the survey for students to talk on behalf of others, and this representation increased our engagement with, and added another level of understanding, of the Royal Holloway research student experience. One student at our focus group discussed their positive experience working alongside their supervisor, but they knew a lot of students who had ‘terrible relationships with their supervisors’ who were ‘not getting the right help from the College’. Another student echoed this sentiment in the survey.

*I see my supervisor most days, and feel I can discuss with them whenever. However, I know several people in [department redacted] who cannot do this. Their supervisor is completely absent, and despite formal complaints the supervisor still becomes the postgraduate representative. Why are there no repercussions for failing supervisors? Thesis go unread for months, leaving a Ph.D. student in unpaid limbo. The SU need to provide help for this.*

The above quotation describes a supervisor who has no investment in their students and the work they produce. This segues into our second question about supervision which asked research students whether they felt their supervisor/s were invested in their research advancement. One student answered the previous question with the statement that their supervisors ‘make themselves available but they do not make themselves approachable’. Contact hours are important, but postgraduate research students rely on their supervisors to help support them in other areas of their research development and, more importantly, supervisors are considered the bridge to important employment networks upon completion of the degree. Again, the majority of students who completed our survey discussed the many positive ways their supervisors have contributed towards their research and development – by emailing call for papers and funding opportunities, giving regular feedback, discussing training opportunities and career prospects, and offering pastoral support when needed. Eight per cent of our survey respondents, however, described instances where their supervisor/s were completely disinterested in their project and did not contribute any feedback towards the research project and the student’s development as a researcher.

The Students’ Union knew there was a possibility students would discuss incidents like this, and we wanted to learn more about the measures in place for reporting a problem. 11.8 per cent of students responded they had experienced a problem or conflict with their supervisor/s. Most respondents explained in their answers they

were often able to resolve the matter, although a number of students indicated another member of staff or their advisor had to step in to mediate. Many students said having an advisor was essential when negotiating the complicated nature of the supervisory relationship, and a few students expressed concern about the possibility of their department removing this role from the degree or not having anyone in this role at all.

*In the department, it is protocol to be allocated an advisor for our project. For many of us this has been a lifeline before getting college involved.*

*My (department redacted) has just eliminated the advisor role (the person who is responsible for my pastoral care), with this function being transferred over to supervisors. My supervisors have been reluctant to get involved in my pastoral care in the past, so I fear future issues.*

Not all students have access to an advisor and are missing out on an important figure who can offer them support and is another link to the department. Moreover, research students often describe themselves as isolated, and the lack of research community within departments only amplifies this feeling. This could be one reason why students are reluctant to talk to other members of staff within the department or to file an official complaint with the University. One survey respondent mentioned they endured two years of problems with their supervisor, and their department was only recently made aware because they were 'too intimidated to report it earlier'. This feeling of powerlessness within the supervisory relationship is common occurrence among research students across the sector, and Dr Janet Metcalfe, Dr Sally Wilson and Professor Katia Levecque discuss it in their report for Vitae, Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers (2018): 'Some PGRs perceived themselves in a powerless position: they didn't want to change their research and didn't believe they could change how they are treated'.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as discussed earlier, many students perceive their supervisors as the gatekeepers to their future, and are afraid of the repercussions if they report issues to their department or the University.

*Ultimately, my supervisors hold the key to my success and reputation in the wider academic community. I decided that everyone has difficulties with their supervisors and that this is part of the PhD process.... and also is a part of working relationships with colleagues. I just need to get through to the other end and then I can voice my concerns when I feel safe to do so.*

---

<sup>8</sup> Dr Janet Metcalfe, Dr Sally Wilson and Professor Katia Levecque, , Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers (2018) Vitae, <<https://re.ukri.org/documents/2018/mental-health-report/>> [accessed 13 June 2019] (p. 19).

What is most troubling about the above survey response is the language the student uses to describe their situation. The student tries to normalise their difficult working relationship with their supervisor as a common occurrence, and subsequently turns their situation into an expected experience of the research degree. Moreover, their description about needing 'to get through to the other end' of the research degree – to survive – until they feel 'safe' enough to speak out is a cause for concern. There is a system in place to report supervisor misconduct – for all issues – within department and at University level, but in this instance this student is choosing not to utilise it out of fear. Crucially, this was not an isolated example in the survey and there were multiple responses where students detailed they had a problem but they had yet to register their complaint with the University.

NUS and the 1752 Group co-authored a paper on sexual misconduct in academia, *Power in the academy: staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education (2018)*, and their discussion of the reasons why students did not file complaints against their supervisors appeared in survey responses. The authors of the paper argue:

It is also clear that institutions bear responsibility for not enabling reporting, and in some cases actively making reporting harder. Some respondents who considered making a report came up against institutional blockages. The third most common reason for not reporting was being unclear of reporting procedures, with respondents indicating that they did not report because they did not know who to tell.<sup>9</sup>

Many of the survey responses resonated with this statement. One student wrote about their attempts to involve the University and the Students' Union Advice Centre to resolve a supervisory issue, but they explained 'there [is] no effective system to deal with the issues when it comes to supervisors.' Another student described their negative experience with their previous supervisor who had no interest in the research project. They also highlighted there was a lack of clear signposting about the complaint process.

*I didn't report it as I didn't want to have a bad relationship with her and didn't know the best way to deal with it.*

The Students' Union spent a good detail of time navigating the University and Doctoral School webpages to see if there was a clear, outlined process for reporting a supervisor. On the Doctoral School website students can access the annual handbook, which includes a section about the complaints and appeals process. The rules are very clear about the requirements for registering a complaint about facilities and provisions of services, although they are less so if a student wants

---

<sup>9</sup> NUS and the 1752 Group, *Power in the academy: staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education*, (2018) <[https://web.unican.es/unidades/igualdad/SiteAssets/guia-de-recursos/acoso/NUS\\_staff\\_stud\\_ent\\_misconduct\\_report.pdf](https://web.unican.es/unidades/igualdad/SiteAssets/guia-de-recursos/acoso/NUS_staff_stud_ent_misconduct_report.pdf)> [accessed 20 June 2019] (p. 31).

to make a complaint 'relating to any aspect of the department, or its staff, or any academic or College matter'.<sup>10</sup> The handbook recommends a student should seek another member of staff in the department or school, preferably their advisor, to find an informal means of resolving the matter. If they are unable to do so, it is then recommended to file a complaint with the University. A complaint can take up to 20 working days for an initial findings letter to be sent out, however, if a meeting is called or it is a busier time of year the process can take longer.

One can appreciate how this uncertainty with response times is off-putting for students in the middle of their research projects. There is also no clear indication about the potential outcomes for complaints on the University webpage or the Code of Practice for Research Degree Students and Supervisors. The Students' Union spoke to a former student who filed an official complaint against their supervisor with the University and suffered emotional and financial hardship as the process dragged on for months. This student 'absolutely did not feel supported' by Royal Holloway throughout the investigation period, and they expressed it was the reason why many students do not file a complaint when there are supervision issues. In addition to uncertainty about the process and lack of support, some students discussed how their negative supervisory relationships were not bad enough for the department or University's attention. While some students went into greater detail than others about their experience, there is an obvious need for clearer signposting about the student-supervisor professional relationship and the process for reporting a complaint so all students have the opportunity to have a positive working relationship with their supervisor.

---

<sup>10</sup> Royal Holloway University of London, Research Degree Student Handbook 2019/20, (2019) <<https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/doctors-school/assets/docs/pdf/pgr-student-handbook.pdf>> [accessed 31 October 2019] (p. 20).

### C3. Facilities and Resources.

In contrast to Supervision, which has a history of high satisfaction within the PRES, Resources consistently has a score of low satisfaction. Royal Holloway was ranked 81st out of the 103 participating institutions in the 2019 PRES and was placed in the lowest quarter for this aspect of the research degree. The Resources section of the PRES asks students to agree with four statements listed in the table below.

<b>4.1</b>	I have suitable working space.
<b>4.2</b>	There is adequate provision of computing resources and facilities.
<b>4.3</b>	There is adequate provision of library facilities (including physical and online resources).
<b>4.4</b>	I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research.

Table 9: Resource questions, PRES

The table below shows Royal Holloway's overall score for these four questions since 2017.

<b>Year</b>	<b>RHUL % Agree</b>	<b>UK Sector % Agree</b>	<b>Difference</b>
2017	69.5	80.9	-11.4
2018	75	79	-4
2019	74	81	-7

Table 10: Overall student responses to the resource section of the PRES, 2017-19

The table reveals the percentage of students who agree with this statement rose four-and-a-half percentage points in 2018, but again dropped in 2019. Despite improvements, the University rank is still significantly lower than the sector average. It was noted in the University Briefing Document for the 2019 PRES analysis that 'there has been a considerable drop in satisfaction in regards to suitable working space'.<sup>11</sup> Royal Holloway is uniquely in the position of being a member institution within the University of London while at the same time being geographically separated from it. While some students on specific courses are situated at our London campus at Bedford Square or choose to work out of Senate House or the British Library, a large majority of research students have a permanent base in Egham and are tied to this location due to teaching and lab commitments. Suitable work space is always going to be a contentious topic in Egham because there will never be enough of it.

The below table shows the individual departmental breakdown of questions 4.1 and 4.2 on the 2019 PRES survey. Cells with a satisfaction of 10 per cent or higher

<sup>11</sup> Royal Holloway University of London, '2019 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) Results', (p.6). This document was emailed to the Students' Union and has yet to be uploaded to the Royal Holloway Staff Intranet.

than the sector average are highlighted in blue, while those with a satisfaction of 10 per cent or lower are in red.

<b>DEPARTMENT</b>	<b>4.1</b>	<b>4.2</b>
Biological Sciences	75	71
Classics	86	86
Computer Science	62	77
Drama	75	83
Earth Sciences	89	74
Economics	78	67
English	72	74
Geography	68	78
History	61	63
Law	42	58
Management	68	79
Maths & Is	40	67
Modern Languages	80	80
Music	77	87
Physics	93	86
PIR	60	56
Psychology	90	95
College Average	71	75
Sector Average	78	79

Table 11: Departmental breakdown of student responses for questions 4.1 and 4.2, PRES 2019

We wanted to learn more about these figures, and why the variance between departments is anywhere from 15 percentage points above the sector average to as low as 38 percentage points below. In our survey, we asked students the following question: ‘Does the College provide you with suitable resources and working space?’ Again, like with supervision, the answers provided were similar to the 2019 PRES results with 69.3 per cent of respondents declaring they were satisfied with the provision of space on campus. When reading through the open text comments, the majority of students indicated their satisfaction was a consequence of the existence of the Research Postgraduate Library Room situated in the Emily Wilding Davison, which has 90 study spaces for students.

*Yes. I appreciate that PGR students have their own room in the library. It is really important for us to have a silent area where we can focus on our work. And, having hard-working PhD students around in the room really helps.*

*Yes, the room specifically for post graduate research students is great in the library. Without it I don't think I would ever find a seat!*

Another recurring trend with positive student responses was the provision of suitable working space within specific departments – an assigned desk, office, lab or computer room to work - and 22.5 per cent of survey respondents mentioned they had access to these personal facilities.

*Yes, a desk in the department is of great use. As it provides ideal working space, surrounded only by persons in the same position as you, thus reducing distraction and also providing valuable help and resources right next to you.*

*Yes, I have a desk I am based at which is invaluable to have as a resource as a PhD student. I also have access to a specialised computing lab which is just a couple of doors down from my desk which makes lab efficient for me.*

As with supervision, students often compare the inconsistencies of their research experience with each other, which highlights the issue of unequal opportunities among departments. Having access to these kinds of facilities will undoubtedly influence a research student's perception of their degree experience as being more positive, but not all research students are given the same opportunities and 15.1 per cent of survey respondents maintained there was a lack of suitable working space for research students on campus. Many of the issues raised were because they lacked many of the benefits described above. It can be argued that those students who are given access to a private or shared office have a considerable advantage and this is likely a major reason for the disparity between scores in the PRES analysis. The students without a guaranteed space of their own described their frustrations over space in the comments below.

*No. Bourne building is inadequate. It is cold, it leaks, there is no natural daylight from the central rooms. Experiments that are meant to be at 'room temperature' have to be done in incubators in the winter, reagents precipitate due to the cold, and people have to sit by portable heaters. There is no suitable office space. There is no where to write other than in the lab - this restricts food and drink consumption and is noisy!*

*The College also took away the [department redacted] PG workspace, which was an \*essential\* academic and pastoral resource for students. Now there is nowhere to go to regularly interact with [other students]. The PGR space in the IB is a joke - small, airless, lightless, and continually colonised by a few people who reserve all the desks for themselves. And the Herringham Room is a disaster - there is no soundproofing so it is loud and ECHOES. I have stopped coming into College as much as possible because there is nowhere suitable to work.*

Students who lack these personal work spaces are subsequently forced to compete for space across campus. In many instances, students mentioned they have started working from home more due to the lack of space and this can have a negative impact on their mental health as they feel this further isolated them from the research community. Working from home also makes it more difficult for research students to differentiate between their work and home life, which is already an issue research students struggle with during the degree. At our events, students described their resentment about the 'disparity of research spaces provided for some departments'. They additionally mentioned the lack of space creates 'strife' among the research student community at Royal Holloway. One student argued all they want was 'place of permanence' to get on with their work.

13 per cent of respondents submitted answers which discussed both their positive and negative experience with the space provided on campus. Some students highlighted that the Research Postgraduate Room was an extremely valuable space, but mentioned how busy it becomes when postgraduate taught students are given access during exam times. Another issue identified by students was a lack of communal space within departments, which students would like to have in order to 'feel more included'. There were also many requests for an increase of locker provision and access to kitchen facilities. Students who have teaching commitments would like a place to store all their research materials without having to drag them around campus. Having access to a communal room and kitchen would also be particularly beneficial to part-time and commuter students who do not often come to campus, but would like access to facilities on the days they are here.

Besides space, the PRES results and our survey found that a strong majority of students are dissatisfied with the University provision of resources. The table below shows the individual departmental breakdown of question 4.4 on the 2019 PRES survey: 'I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research'. Cells with a satisfaction of 10 per cent or higher than the sector average are highlighted in blue, while those with a satisfaction of 10 per cent or lower are in red.

<b>DEPARTMENT</b>	<b>4.4</b>
Biological Sciences	69
Classics	63
Computer Science	69
Drama	54
Earth Sciences	89
Economics	100
English	69
Geography	65
History	63
Law	50
Management	71
Maths & Is	85
Modern Languages	60
Music	59
Physics	93
PIR	71
Psychology	94
College Average	71
Sector Average	79

Table 12: Departmental breakdown of student responses for question 4.4, PRES 2019

In regards to resources, the largest student complaint during our in-person discussion groups and the online survey was that there was a distinct lack of e-resources and library books. This was reaffirmed in the PRES open comments for the last three academic years. One student wrote in 2019 PRES that they had 'relied on inter-library loans and the British Library where RHUL has not had access to the resources required. I also use other London libraries through SCONUL'. While this types of service is extremely helpful, it is not a sustainable research practice as students are not guaranteed their request, delivery times may vary for receiving the item, there are time limits for holding the item, and students are often not allowed to make a repeat request.

One thing the Students' Union noticed in our discussion about library resources was that many students we talked to did not know they could access the online database and journals at Senate House without having to sign up for a physical library card in London. Royal Holloway students can sign up remotely through a portal on the Royal Holloway library website which will give them access to

Senate House's extensive collection of online resources. We spoke to the librarians as to why students do not take advantage of this service. They acknowledged information was not very clear on the main library page. They do discuss this service during the autumn induction talks, but students who enrol after this period may spend more than six months researching before they are made aware of this extremely useful service. Most students in the PRES and our deliberative events maintained after such a prolonged period of work they consider the induction talk redundant. Increased regularity of induction talks throughout the year and improved signposting of information will help research students become more aware of the multiple online resources and other training services available to them. There were also requests for the content of these talks to be uploaded to the University's Moodle page or the Doctoral School in order to improve the research experience for distance learners and part-time students who are unable to attend these events and miss out on important information about resources. The next section will further discuss ways to enrich the research culture at Royal Holloway.

In addition to a lack of print and online resources, students also mentioned the University did not provide students with suitable training resources. Many highlighted in the PRES open comments and our survey that they would like access to the same support services that undergraduates have like Centre for the Development of Academic Skills (CeDAS).

*Lots of PhD students are also international students and face problems in language and cultural assimilation. CeDAS used to offer writing support to the PGRs before but that has now been discontinued. – PRES 2019*

*The only thing as an international student, who experienced studying in the UK for the first time is to receive more help and support in writing academic English. Unfortunately, CeDAS do not offer 1:1 help for PGR students. I tried approaching them several times to comment on my writing and the use of grammar but they informed me that they were not allowed to do so.*

International students in particular discussed their frustration with not being able to access these services in the PRES, our survey and online discussions. They argued their supervisors were not responsible for this area of provision, but were at a loss at how to improve their situation. In addition to accessing more training resources, software was another area that was repeatedly brought up by students:

*The resources are also inadequate. Vital software such as Chemdraw isn't provided, this is something that is very rare for a university. Other University*

*of London colleges provide it, just not RHUL. Referencing software is also absent. Endnote for desktop is provided for staff, yet for postgraduates, who have the biggest documents to write can't have it. Why?*

*I am in my 3rd year now, preparing my data collection, but I don't get access to the online survey software Qualtrics which my department does not have, but others from the university, but cannot share it. My department does not provide trainings, which might be useful, but in the end, a few were organised by the RDP after I requested them.*

Much like the disparity of space between departments, access to specific software appears to be another contentious issue within the research community at Royal Holloway. In many ways, research students are doing similar work to academic staff – submitting journal articles, presenting conference papers, marking – and it would be beneficial if they had access to the same benefits as staff.

Finally, in regards to facilities and resources, it is important to remember that research students do not work under the same timetables as undergraduate students and are still working on campus during periods when undergraduates are not, like over the holidays and the long summer break. This is often their best opportunity to catch up on their own research, conference preparation and journal submissions, and they would like to be able to access services during these quieter periods. One student responded to the SU President's Change Your Experience email and explained the reduced hours at University commercial services, the gym and restricted access to catering venues like The Hub, which Oxford International students have access to over the summer, makes postgraduate research students 'feel like no one cares' about them. This is an area the Students' Union could also improve in to make postgraduate research students feel more welcome, but it will be discussed later in the report.

## **C4. Research Culture and the Doctoral School.**

---

The Research Culture section of the PRES has continuously been ranked the lowest section across participating institutions for the last few years.<sup>12</sup> While feedback was the lowest scored question for Royal Holloway, Research Culture is in fact the lowest ranking category for the University and has seen a drop of nine percentage points since 2017. The Research Culture section of the PRES is composed of four questions, which are listed in the table below.

---

<sup>12</sup> Dr Simon Williams, 2019 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (2019), Advance HE <<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/postgraduate-research-experience-survey-2019>> p.19 [accessed 11 November 2019].

- 6.1** I have access to a good seminar programme in my research area.
- 6.2** I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other researchers including research students.
- 6.3** The research community in my research area stimulates my work.
- 6.4** I am aware of the opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department.

Table 13: Research Culture questions, PRES

The 2019 overall score for these questions was 60 per cent, which is below the sector average of 63 per cent. The lowest ranked question in this section is 6.3, which is presented in the table below. Cells with a satisfaction of 10 per cent or higher than the sector average are highlighted in blue, while those with a satisfaction of 10 per cent or lower are in red.

<b>DEPARTMENT</b>	<b>4.4</b>
Biological Sciences	55
Classics	70
Computer Science	46
Drama	36
Earth Sciences	63
Economics	78
English	44
Geography	85
History	35
Law	38
Management	59
Maths & Is	60
Modern Languages	40
Music	38
Physics	64
PIR	63
Psychology	70
College Average	54
Sector Average	60

The PRES open comments presented reasons as to why there is a distinct lack of research community in most departments at Royal Holloway.

*This is possibly the most insufficient and disappointing aspect of PhD studies in RHUL in my department. No structured occasions to interact, discuss or collaborate. Such a shame. – PRES 2019*

*If you're a 'remote' student - and self-funding you're pretty much left to your own devices. Fine for me but not great for everyone. – PRES 2018*

*It is up to me to find research seminars and attend them. I find the department very poor in getting research students together for discussions and other events. – PRES 2017*

Similar sentiments were echoed in our online survey, often in response to our question: 'Are you satisfied with your experience of your research degree so far?'

*The research is really exciting, and elements of the department are brilliant. When I started I thought there was a fantastic community within the department but over the years this seems to have been subsumed by too much work for the staff, so they don't have time or the inclination to spend much time with the postgrad community. I'm also based at UCL and think that there is a lot more offered there for the postgraduate community, professionally and also socially (which helps a lot with the mental health aspect).*

*PhD students feel no sense of community with the college or students body and generally feel isolated. The program is structured in a way that a lot of students don't even come to campus regularly which means any calls for meetings go unanswered.*

*There is almost no research community which has made the experience isolating and less interesting.*

At our January deliberative event, two students mentioned the lack of community in their department was so disheartening they have subsequently begun the process of creating a student-led seminar group with the aim to improve the situation. While it is encouraging to see research students trying to change this narrative, it is not solely their responsibility to do so.

While the research degree can at times feel extremely isolating, training workshops are one opportunity which successfully bring research students together across different departments at Royal Holloway. Both induction talks run by departments and the Doctoral School offer new students the chance to meet other researchers both within and outside their respective research areas. The amount of training students undertake at the start of their degree is, perhaps, one reason why they feel more involved in the research community at this point and less so at the end. The pressures of teaching, experiments, other commitments like conferences and, finally, the writing-up period are undoubtedly aspects of the degree which exacerbate their feelings of isolation as they progress. There are exceptions – part-time students, commuter students and MRes students sometimes feel isolated throughout the entirety of their degree. Departments and the Doctoral School need to make more efforts to try making these students feel more included. Suggestions were creating an MRes induction or hosting more events for research students at the Bedford Square campus which might be more accessible to students not based in Egham. Finally, the University's location is also a contributing factor. Part-time and commuter students are likely unable to make events, and students situated on Royal Holloway's London campus speak of a 'divide' between the two locations. All of these factors further emphasise the importance of creating a more regular coordination of events for research students across both campuses, departments, the Doctoral School and Students' Union.

The Doctoral School's Researcher Development Programme directed by Laura Christie is one example of a successful cross-departmental opportunity which brings students together on a more regular basis. Like the induction talks, this is one area of the research community that was rated a positive aspect of their student experience by respondents in both the PRES and our survey. One part-time student mentioned at our deliberative event they found the course content of the Research Development programmes interesting, but the incentive to attend was actually the chance to meet and speak with other research students. The courses are general enough to appeal to research students across departments, and our survey revealed the Researcher Development Programme is one of the more successful streams of work provided by the Doctoral School.

The Doctoral School is a recent addition to Royal Holloway. It was created during the academic restructure as one of the seven new schools, and its main purpose is to streamline services and support postgraduate research students in the following areas: the PGR student journey, PGR recruitment and funding, PGR community, PGR skills training, and to act as a point of contact to University support services like Wellbeing and the Careers Service. The Doctoral School has its own webpage which hosts all the relevant information for research students in a more accessible

manner than the main University webpage. While the Doctoral School acts as a platform to host this information, a lot of the University content about the research degree life cycle is unclear to some students. For example, The Research Degree Student Handbook 2019/20 lists the specific timetable and process for the upgrade, however, many of the individual department appendices describe something very different to what is presented in the handbook.

*It is not very clear what is required in detail for the “Upgrade” based on the online documents. – PRES 2019*

*[O]ccasionally guidance is a little lacking in terms of what’s required for certain things – e.g. upgrades.*

It is the students’ duty to read the handbook and understand their department’s rules, but supervisors should also be actively discussing the upgrade process with their research students so they are aware of what needs to be done over the designated period of time. It appears, however, this is not always the case. One student at our deliberative event mentioned students are not the only ones confused about the upgrade, and many supervisors are not always aware of the requirements. The student said they had to repeatedly ‘chase up’ their supervisors in order to submit within the required period. This is one area where the University could make information more coherent for both staff and students.

The research students who attended our focus groups, the PGR coffee mornings and our deliberative event all agreed another area which could be improved was the communication system at the Doctoral School. In the past, students received email updates and all relevant information from their departmental administrators, and they were the team responsible for any queries students might have had. This role has transitioned over to the team at the Doctoral School during the restructure, but many students still do not know who they are supposed to contact for queries. This results in wasted emails and phone calls because students often contact both their departments and the Schools and, in some cases, receive inconsistent information. Students at our discussion events also explained they receive the same emails from both their departments and the Doctoral School. Another point of concern is where there is a communication breakdown between departments and the Doctoral School. One MRes student indicated that they received separate, and clashing, induction timetables from both parties which resulted in him missing an important talk he was supposed to attend. This was particularly frustrating as the student is both a commuter and studies part-time, and they have to meticulously plan their trips to campus. Another student echoed this sentiment, and argued the main issue is that departments and the Doctoral

School ‘don’t talk to each other’ when issues like this arise which only leads to more confusion. Some of these issues could be a consequence of the academic restructure, but it appears there needs to be improved lines of communication between departments and the Doctoral School with clearer guidelines about their responsibilities.

One final comment about the way the University communicates with research students regards the transparency of fees. Some students we spoke to mentioned they would like further information about the writing-up fee, especially in regards to how it is spent. One student in their second year mentioned they had only recently found out about the fee. Another part-time student at our deliberative event admitted they did not know about the fee until we mentioned it at the event, and they were going to enter that stage of the degree next year. They asked us if we know how it was divided over the two-year period and, unfortunately, we were unable to answer that question. The same second-year student also brought up the issue that some Home students have with trying to get their student loans distributed over a four-year period to include the writing-up year when they apply. The lack of information about the writing-up fee on the University website means this request is often denied. Students understand that the research degree is considered a three-year degree, however, the reality reveals that the majority of research students take the writing-up year. Consequently, there should be clearer information on both the University main website and the Doctoral School page about the writing-up fee, along with an official document for students to show loan providers.

## **C6. Mental Health and Wellbeing Support.**

---

At our January deliberative event we asked our participants to prioritise our list of recommendations, and the top three positions were filled by recommendations which focused on improving mental health and wellbeing support for research students. Our briefing document touched on the ways higher education institutes have taken active steps to improve mental health awareness and access to services in higher education. However, there is less knowledge about the wellbeing of research students – the PRES is one vehicle to gain insight into this issue. Advance HE changed the questions for the wellbeing section in the 2019 survey, and the four questions they asked are listed in the table below.

<b>22.1</b>	Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
<b>22.2</b>	Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
<b>22.3</b>	Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
<b>22.4</b>	Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

*Table 15: Wellbeing questions, PRES*

Student respondents were asked to measure their responses using a 0 to 10 scale. Royal Holloway’s Wellbeing section in 2019 was scored at 58 per cent, which is slightly lower than the sector average which was 60 per cent. Dr Simon Williams discusses wellbeing in Advance HE’s paper on the PRES sector analysis, 2019 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (2019), and argues ‘the area of most concern among the PGR population is in terms of anxiety’.<sup>13</sup> It is measured on a scale of 0 to 10, where the score of “0” was “not anxious” and “10” was “completely anxious”.<sup>14</sup> This was done to match the rest of the PRES scores so that a high score is considered more positive. The University average for this section was 29 per cent, with some departments scoring as low as 14 per cent. This highlights that research student anxiety is a major concern at Royal Holloway.

As discussed in our briefing document, there is a culture of acceptance within academia around stress and anxiety being a normal element of the degree. While stress ‘is reported to be higher amongst academic staff than across the general population’, it is not always considered a negative and, at times, ‘is an important quality for successful researchers’.<sup>15</sup> There is a problem, however, when stress-levels become unmanageable, and lead to higher-levels of anxiety.<sup>16</sup> In many ways, the nature of the research degree fosters an unhealthy environment for student wellbeing, and our engagement with the postgraduate community brought attention to the areas where they would like to see change in this area. Because we felt like the PRES questions specifically asked students about their current wellbeing level, we wanted to ask students their opinions on the way supervisors, departments and University services provide support in this area. In our survey we asked students to respond to the questions below.

Do you feel like your department and supervisor/s offer you mental health and wellbeing support? Please explain how.
If you have ever used the College mental health wellbeing services, what was your experience using these services?
What do the College’s mental health and wellbeing services NOT provide that you would like to be made available?

Table 16: Wellbeing questions, Students’ Union PGR Student Experience Survey, 2019

59 per cent of respondents felt like their supervisors and departments offered them mental health and wellbeing support. Many students at our in-person discussion events and in the survey mentioned they felt supported by their supervisors, but

<sup>13</sup> Dr Simon Williams, 2019 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, Advanced HE, <[https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/AdvanceHE-Postgraduate\\_Research\\_%20Survey\\_%202019\\_1574338111.pdf](https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/AdvanceHE-Postgraduate_Research_%20Survey_%202019_1574338111.pdf)> [accessed 8 November 2019] (p. 25).

<sup>14</sup> Dr Simon Williams, 2019 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, 25.

<sup>15</sup> Dr Janet Metcalfe, Dr Sally Wilson and Professor Katia Levecque, Exploring wellbeing and mental health, p. 6.

<sup>16</sup> Dr Janet Metcalfe, Dr Sally Wilson and Professor Katia Levecque, Exploring wellbeing and mental health, p. 6.

not always by the department. As seen in the quotations below, speaking about mental health is an extremely personal subject, and not all researchers want to discuss this topic with their supervisors, especially as many students perceive doing so will negatively impact their progression and career options following completion of the degree.

*Yes, my supervisor was supportive when I needed help. There has been an odd distance with other department staff, though, perhaps due to stigma.*

*My Department only offers mental health/wellbeing support if \*I\* initiate things, e.g. mental health-related workshops or roundtables at “in-house” postgraduate days. Both my supervisors offer a lot of moral, mental health and wellbeing support.*

*My supervisors are very supportive, however I personally don't like to discuss my mental health with them (although I know that I can) and prefer to discuss it with my personal tutor who is very supportive and easy to talk to.*

23 per cent of survey respondents felt their supervisors and departments did not offer them mental health and wellbeing support.

*No. This has never been spoken about whatsoever. It was not brought up in any of my supervisor meetings or Annual Reviews. I think it is an aspect that should be pushed by the new Postgraduate Collective very much so. We are of the understanding that the wellbeing lead in the department only handles Undergraduate matters.*

*No. A few weeks ago I explained to my supervisors that I have been struggling mentally during these final few months [...] Their advice was that this is normal in the final stages of a PhD write up and that I should continue as I am and should still be meeting deadlines. [...] I also explained that I had been home to visit my parents over a weekend and they questioned my commitment to the PhD and said I shouldn't be taking time off. I feel there is an element of “everyone experiences something similar so just get on with it” kind of attitude across academia as a whole, not just in relation to my supervisors. The whole system is based on output and I see myself as a number or a scientific output rather than an individual. If I were to delay PhD submission to focus on my mental health I feel I would be considered an inconvenience rather than it being of benefit for my wellbeing.*

The above quotation reinforces arguments Dr Janet Metcalfe, Dr Sally Wilson and Professor Katia Levecque made in their report on mental health about the history of academic and professional staff normalising the high demand of work, stress and anxiety associated with the research degree.<sup>17</sup> There have been steps to try and change this narrative, but the response above indicates this type of exchange still occurs between supervisors and their research students. When they do, research students often resign themselves to this fate, and accept that these overwhelming feelings of stress are to be expected throughout the degree which, as research shows, can be a trigger for poor mental health and wellbeing. This is one area where staff, particularly those in supervisor roles, could benefit from undertaking mental health and wellbeing training in order to better support their students during the degree.

In theory, students should utilise the University's Wellbeing services if they are uncomfortable bringing up their mental health and wellbeing with their supervisors or their supervisors are not supportive in that area. We wanted to know whether research students took advantage of this service. Our second question asked students if they had ever used the University's Wellbeing services, and the table below shows the breakdown of student responses in our survey.

<b>Answer</b>	<b>Student Responses</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
Yes	49	26
No	93	50
N/A	44	24

*Table 17: Student responses to wellbeing questions, Students' Union PGR Student Experience Survey, 2019*

The students who answered they had attended talks or sessions with Wellbeing services highlighted there was a lack of funding for research students, appointments were too short and not enough sessions were offered to warrant continued use. Multiple students discussed how they had been offered more sessions as an undergraduate at Royal Holloway in comparison to what they were offered as a research student. Other respondents felt their counsellors lacked experience and training to discuss ways to combat the stress of the research degree. Age was another issue and multiple students explained in our survey that they feel like they are 'invisible to all college services' as mature students. It could be argued that, in some ways, research students as a whole feel invisible to University services.

<sup>17</sup> Dr Janet Metcalfe, Dr Sally Wilson and Professor Katia Levecque, Exploring wellbeing and mental health, p. 18.

*My experience was okay. For one the counsellors do not have much experience of dealing with older or more mature students and do not have an understanding of the rigours and pressure of PhD study. Their advice sometimes appears generic and over simplified that does not really address the severity of our issues.*

*The counselling service is good but is solely a listening service, I think there needs to be a more active counselling service for postgraduate students who may be experiencing mental health issues.*

It is this reason why many research students choose not to go to the Wellbeing services.

*There was no clear understanding on whether the services could support PG level. A lot of miscommunications and being passed around put a group of us PGs completely off using the College wellbeing services. We outrightly said to our Head of Department as joint students of UCL that we would seriously consider using UCL services as a first call.*

Another reason many students choose not to utilise the Wellbeing services is because they are apprehensive at the thought of possibly running into undergraduates they teach. One student revealed at our deliberative event they were 'uncomfortable because they don't want the student to see them in a different light'. Others agreed at the event that they would be more likely to attend wellbeing sessions through the University services if they were to block postgraduate sessions separately from undergraduate appointments, and if there was more tailored support for research students. Other suggestions from students in our survey suggested increased provision in the summer, more online resources about mental health and the research degree on Moodle and the Doctoral School, required mental health training for supervisors, and the introduction of wellbeing events through departmental roundtable days or the Doctoral School. Events could be student sessions to informally discuss their experiences or they could be specific talks about particular issues like Imposter Syndrome, combatting anxiety and managing workload. Besides addressing research students' poor mental health, these sessions would also bring students together which would improve the research community at Royal Holloway. Students brought up at our in-person events how their isolation as research students significantly contributes to their poor mental health.

## C7. Research Student Employability and the Careers Service.<sup>18</sup>

For many research students, the ultimate goal following the completion of their degree remains a permanent position at a higher education institute. This statement is mostly true for research students at Royal Holloway in regards to their career aspirations after the viva. The table below reveals the top four responses students gave in the 2019 PRES when asked about their plans after completing the degree.

Career	% of responses
Academic career in HE (research and teaching, or teaching only)	40
Not sure or not decided yet	17
Research career outside higher education	13
Research career in higher education	10

Table 18: Student responses to Career aspirations questions, PRES 2019

About half of student respondents in the 2019 PRES maintained they want to continue to work within academia with the other half interested in employment in other sectors.<sup>19</sup> The Students' Union wanted to better understand the career aspirations of the research student community, and asked students four questions about their experience with careers advice from both their departments and the University Careers Service, which are included in the subsequent table.

When you began your research degree, did you have a clear career goal, and has this changed?
Do you feel like your department and supervisor/s provide career support for a variety of pathways in academic and non-academic roles? Please explain how.
If you have ever attended any careers talks or events run by the College Careers Service, what was your experience?
What sort of careers support would you like to see made available by your department or the College that isn't already offered?

Table 19: Career questions, Students' Union PGR Student Experience Survey, 2019

The first question was created to better understand whether the experience of doing a research degree at Royal Holloway significantly changed students' ideas about their future career since enrolling. Student responses were separated into four categories, which are listed in the table below.

<sup>18</sup> In addition to this Student Voice Report, the Students' Union will be publishing another one specifically about the University Careers Service. The recommendations we have listed here pertaining to postgraduate research students will also be included in that report.

<sup>19</sup> Other responses in this section of the PRES included: 'any other professional career', 'self-employment (including setting up own business)', 'other', 'returning to employer who is sponsoring your degree', 'returning to or remaining with employer who is not sponsoring your degree' and 'teaching (at a level below higher education)'.

Theme	% of student responses
Yes a career in HE which has not changed	11
Yes a career in HE which has changed	10
Yes but this has not changed	49
Yes but this has changed	5
No I did not have a clear career goal	25

Table 20: Student responses, Students' Union PGR Student Experience Survey, 2019

Below are some examples of students' answers to the first question.

*I did. I want to be a lecturer, but my supervisor has encouraged me in various directions and I'm enjoying the journey immensely.*

*I did, to stay in academia and be a post doc. But this has now changed - I'm not against doing a post doc but academia has a particularly toxic environment I know wouldn't be good for my overall well-being.*

*No I think the PhD has opened up different routes for me. But I have yet to explore these in lots of depth.*

*I knew roughly what area I was aiming for and what my objectives were in achieving this. This hasn't really changed; though my awareness of different options that are relevant to my career trajectory has improved.*

*I didn't have a clear goal and now I think I have less of an idea of what I want to do now I've been more exposed to academia and industry.*

Student responses varied in this section of the survey with respondents giving extremely specific answers or ones that were quite vague with a simple 'yes it has changed' or 'yes and it has not changed'. The Students' Union found the lack of detail in this section of the survey baffling, and it was only when we analysed the other questions that we better understood why student responses were perhaps less clear for this question. In the subsequent career questions of the survey, many students explained that, when they did receive career support from their supervisors and departments, the information provided was usually only about careers in academia which they did not find particularly useful. Perhaps students were unable to describe their career aspirations in more detail as they are not entirely sure what they are because their supervisors are not discussing all of the alternative choices that are available to them.

*In the UK, the academic and non-academic roles are very much separated. Therefore, I do not feel encouraged and thus informed about any other options than academia.*

*My department and supervisors are more academic career focused, there is not as much support for non-academic roles.*

*I feel I am supported in my choice to pursue a career outside of academic but any opportunities I have found are of my own making.*

For the 50 per cent of students determined to continue working within higher education this information is incredibly useful, and many students appreciated the advice they received from their supervisors about this type of role. However, the other half of research students who are looking at potential roles outside of academia need more support in this area both from their departments and the University Careers Service – of which an overwhelming 73 per cent of survey respondents said they had never attended any careers talks or events provided by this professional service. The majority of students argued this was because they felt like the Careers Service does not offer any kind of support for postgraduate research students.

*College Careers Service is AWFUL when it comes to supporting PhD students with academic jobs. They don't have a single staff trained about academic job application needs. Very disappointing.*

*I attended the career fair last year, but I was a bit disappointed. None of the companies fitted my interest. They were too generic. Also, the majority did not seem interested in PhD students.*

*I haven't used the careers service myself but a colleague who is also a PhD student has said that they don't have much of an idea for pathways that would be useful for the skills we get through a PhD.*

When asked about the types of services they would like to have, the survey respondents offered some incredibly useful answers.

*More support for non-academic career paths, this could involve workshops/talks from the non-academic sector with a focus on transferable skills*

*Maybe a careers day for the PhD and research students where there could be some talks and some stands. It's daunting the thought of finishing my*

*PhD and I have no idea what I am and aren't qualified to do. Given that research is a change of career for me, I'm struggling with the applications for jobs as I don't know what they are looking for or how to sell my newly acquired skill set'*

*There should be a requirement in the PhD supervisor meeting forms for supervisors and students to have at least 1 meeting per year where careers inside and outside of academia are discussed. This should be a formal requirement of the PhD process and should be documented at each annual review with meeting notes required for the annual review documentation. PhD students should also be required to attend a RHUL careers event and this should be compulsory.*

*Bringing more people in or alumni to talk about their experience and how they got jobs.*

Other suggestions which came up at our in-person events were that the Careers Service should offer postgraduate research student sessions on both academic and non-academic CV writing workshops, interview preparation, and talks on topics like life after the research degree and 'the Slump' following the viva. If the University Careers Service is ill-equipped to create these types of programmes for postgraduate researcher students, departments and the Doctoral School need to work in collaboration with the Careers Service to structure events for this community of students. In addition to an improved programme of talks and events from the Careers Service, students also mentioned they would like more career talks included in the Researcher Development Programme, especially sessions which discuss careers outside of academia. The content from these talks should also be uploaded to Moodle and the Doctoral School webpage so that part-time, commuter and London-based students can access this valuable information.

## **C8. The Students' Union and the Postgraduate.**

---

As mentioned in the Executive Summary, postgraduate research students have mixed feelings about the level of involvement the Students' Union should have with the research student community. Many survey respondents stated they were fine with us being an undergraduate service provider, and we understand that the majority of postgraduate research students do not want to attend themed club nights, or have the time to participate in other events we offer through programmes like Give It A Go due to teaching and lab commitments. We understand the needs of postgraduate research students are very different to the undergraduate student population, and there are many elements of the Students' Union which simply

do not appeal to this demographic of students. Throughout our engagement, however, we gained insight into the types of service they would like to see offered and in our recommendations we have hopefully identified ways we can better integrate research students into the Students' Union.

Primarily, postgraduate research students were pleased with the introduction of this Policy Inquiry and our actions to try and improve their student experience at Royal Holloway. Some students wrote they wanted to see more projects like this in the future and were interested in 'our political role in the University' as well as our 'advocacy and community-building work' for this community of students. One way we have already tried to do this is with the implementation of a Postgraduate Research Students Collective following the passing of the Democracy Review. Student Collectives were created with the aim to give underrepresented groups a platform to have their voices heard both within the Students' Union and the College. Led by elected convenors, Student Collectives are responsible for organising activities, events and campaigns. Moreover, they receive funding and work together with the Students' Union to secure the general interests and rights of the students who self-define into their relevant group. While the Postgraduate Research Students Collective is a relatively recent student group, there have already been discussions about the ways we can further inform the research student community through 'student rights' articles on important topics like the upgrade process, and there have been preliminary discussions about future events, like a conference, which we hope will foster the feeling of community among research students at Royal Holloway.

While research students do not want entertainment nights in the same vein as undergraduates, many research students believe the Students' Union 'could host some appropriate social events'.

*Maybe hold more events to socialise with other PhD students. For example, having activities or competitions between PhD students in different departments, quizzes, icebreakers, talks about mutual topics; for eg how to deal with stress and each student discusses their experience and tips.*

At our deliberative event in January, students suggested hosting a dinner once a term and inviting staff to attend. Many survey respondents reiterated these sentiments, and they maintained hosting recurring recreational meet-ups would help prevent 'academic burnout' and create 'interdisciplinary communication' among research students across the Schools. Some international students discussed in our survey and at our in-person events that a more coordinated service of events with the University and the Doctoral School would help them integrate into their new lives

in the UK. And, as mentioned in the Facilities and Resources section of the paper, they would like there to be more services opened out of term time, especially during the summer holidays.

Finally, students mentioned they would like societies and sports clubs to be more open to the idea of postgraduate students as members.

*There should be more emphasis on societies being attractive to postgrads! I have gone to societies but feel very much there is so much targeting from SU of freshers nights etc, and I don't know of many PhD students who get involved in societies probably because they feel too old etc.*

Postgraduate research students feel like our student groups are unreceptive towards mature students, and it is this reason why many do not apply to become members. A handful of survey respondents stated they were members of one of our student groups, but they often feel excluded and are treated like 'outsiders'. Sports and clubs can be excellent outlets to relieve academic pressure and anxiety, and research students should be allowed to participate equally in these opportunities with undergraduates. The Students' Union should consider the current level of involvement and should further encourage postgraduate research students to become more involved in student groups.

## **C9. Conclusion and Next Steps.**

---

We are confident that we have undertaken some insightful initial research into the postgraduate research student experience at Royal Holloway and we believe that we have articulated a number of recommendations which, once implemented, would have a substantial and long-lasting positive impact on the research student community at Royal Holloway.

# Recommendations.

---

## 1. Facilities and Resources.

---

There are issues with current University facilities which pertain to postgraduate research students, especially in regards to a consistent lack of available research space and resources.

- 1.1** The University should conduct a full, comprehensive review of the PGR space on both the Egham and Bedford Square campus: this should include the Research Postgraduate Library Space in the Emily Wilding Davison (EWD) Building, the Herringham Room, the International Building and any School or departmental space that might be available.
- 1.2** The University should increase the number of lockers in the Research Postgraduate Library Space in the EWD Building. Many students have teaching and lab commitments on the Egham campus, and increasing storage provision in the Research Postgraduate Library Space will allow them the opportunity to leave their materials in a safe place while undertaking these other commitments.
- 1.3** The University and Doctoral School should improve signposting information about accessing library resources at Senate House online. This should be listed on both the Royal Holloway library main page as well as the Doctoral School website. Information should be easily signposted and also include an explanation for students about accessing information remotely.
- 1.4** The University should extend opening hours for commercial services during the periods outside of undergraduate term time, particularly enabling PGR students to have the same access to all catering outlets that the Oxford International students receive over the summer period. Postgraduate research students continue to work during the summer break, and the reduced opening times and restricted access to catering outlets negatively impacts their experience during these months.

## **2. Doctoral School and Research Community.**

---

There is a strong consensus among current postgraduate research students that the University should streamline services provided by both departments and the Doctoral School, with the aim to improve signposting of information, training and engagement with the postgraduate research community.

- 2.1** The University and the Doctoral School should provide coherent and easily accessible information regarding research student progression and attainment. One area students have highlighted needs more clarification and visibility on the website is the upgrade, especially as many departmental processes conflict with the information found in the PGR Student Handbook 2019/20.
- 2.2** The Doctoral School should update the content on their website which links to University services so that it is tailored more towards postgraduate research students. An example of where this could be improved is the 'Explore my career options' found underneath the 'Research development' subheading. The link provided takes research students to the Careers website which is primarily targeted at undergraduate students and does not include any information which is relevant to those undertaking a research degree.
- 2.3** The University and Doctoral School should increase the flexibility of induction talks for postgraduate research students. This would allow students who begin their degree outside the traditional recruitment timeline to access valuable information within a timely manner. There have been many reported instances of students who start during the spring and summer term having to wait on average more than six months to attend the relevant induction talks.
- 2.4** The University and Doctoral School should consider implementing separate induction talks for MRes students. Student feedback in our survey and in-person discussion highlighted that the content of these talks was primarily targeted towards students undertaking doctoral degrees. Holding induction talks specifically for MRes students would streamline their induction process and provide them with the opportunity to meet other students undertaking the MRes degree. This would help foster a feeling of community among MRes students who feel quite isolated within the research student community.

- 2.5** The University and the Doctoral school should signpost whether information and training talks are relevant to MRes students. This recommendation also applies to all strands of the Researcher Development Programme run by the Doctoral School.
- 2.6** The University should improve the provision of online training resources on either Moodle or the Doctoral School website. Many students with both part and full-time status undertake their degree off-campus, and improving online content would be extremely beneficial to their degree experience.
- 2.7** The University should allow international postgraduate research students the opportunity to access the same University support services like EDC and CeDas as undergraduate international students.
- 2.8** The University should provide full transparency on where the £400 writing-up fee is spent and provide an official document which clarifies this information to students. Our engagement with research students revealed that a large proportion were unaware of this fee. There was particular confusion among part-time students as to how this payment was spread out over the two-year writing up period. There were also reported instances where students were unable to apply for their student loans over a four-year period because the University does not provided students with information which explicitly states the purpose of this fee and how it is spent.
- 2.9** The University should work alongside the individual Schools or departments and re-introduce 'Roundtable Days'. Roundtable Days should occur at regular intervals throughout the year and should be composed of professional development workshops and research presentations between staff and postgraduate research students. One area of concern which arose in our research and engagement was the lack of community among research students and academic staff. Roundtable Days are one example of how this can be improved.
- 2.10** The University should create a clear, accessible and coherent delegation of responsibilities between the Doctoral School and academic units.

### **3. Supervision.**

---

While the majority of doctoral students are generally happy with supervision at Royal Holloway, there are still areas which could be improved that will allow all students to have a successful and professional working relationship with their supervisors.

- 3.1** The University should create a consistent and transparent process across Schools and departments in the specific instance when a supervisor leaves the University and puts a research student's supervision in question. This information should be included in the PGR Student Handbook 2019/20 as well as on the Doctoral School website.
  
- 3.2** The University should provide clarification and enable an understanding about the difference between a supervisor and an advisor. As not all departments have an advisor, this clarification needs to be made easily accessible to students where it applies.
  
- 3.3** The University should introduce clear information on the College and Doctoral School website which explains the research student-supervisor professional relationship.
  
- 3.4** The University should clarify the process for reporting a complaint relating to supervisor misconduct and make this information easily accessible on both the University website and the Doctoral School website.

### **4. Mental Health and Wellbeing.**

---

Improving students' mental health and wellbeing across all levels of studies in higher education is an issue the University takes seriously and, while there have been some great steps taken to improve undergraduate mental health, there is more work to be done for research students. The research student experience is significantly different from taught undergraduate and postgraduate taught courses. The University needs to alter its services and address the problem within the postgraduate research community where poor mental health and wellbeing is a common occurrence.

- 4.1** The University should provide mental health training to all members of academic staff involved in supervisor roles.

- 4.2** The University should provide online resources with coherent and relevant information about mental health and the research degree. This should be easily accessible on both the main University Wellbeing services webpage and the Doctoral School website.
- 4.3** The University, the Doctoral School and departments should run coordinated events which focus on the pressures of undertaking a research degree. Topics students have mentioned they would like to be covered are ways to combat stress, anxiety and imposter syndrome.
- 4.4** The University Wellbeing services should create a separate strand of service for postgraduate research students. This new stream of work should provide separate sessions specifically for research students to avoid the risk of attending sessions which might have undergraduate students they might teach.

## **5. Employability and the Careers Service.**

---

Our engagement with students highlighted there needs to be better information relayed to doctoral students about their career development following completion of the degree. The University Careers Service currently provides very little support for research students at Royal Holloway.

- 5.1** The University Careers Service should run a Postgraduate Research Degree Careers Fair every year, with both academic and non-academic opportunities given equal representation at the event.
- 5.2** The University Careers Service should work alongside the Doctoral School and offer more sessions specifically tailored for postgraduate research students. Students listed some examples of sessions like academic CV and cover letter writing workshops, grant proposal workshops, talks about 'the PhD slump' following the viva as well as general career workshops about their employment prospects upon completion of the degree.
- 5.3** The Doctoral School should include more talks about career opportunities within the Research Development Programme and uploaded the content to Moodle to support distance learning students. These talks should include both academic and non-academic career opportunities.
- 5.4** The University and the Doctoral School should update the content on the website about career opportunities after completing the research

degree. The current link on the Doctoral School website takes students to the Careers Services website which is comprised of information primarily targeted towards undergraduate students.

## **6. Postgraduate Research Students and the Students' Union.**

---

The Students' Union is aware that we have not provided the same level of service to postgraduates as we have towards undergraduates. While a lot of students in our discussion groups and online survey admitted they did not know what type of role the Students' Union should play in their degree, we hope the following recommendations will have a positive impact on the research student community at Royal Holloway.

- 6.1** The Students' Union should expand opening hours on services out of the traditional undergraduate term time.
- 6.2** The Students' Union should host a greater number of mature events for postgraduate research students, and should contribute towards a more coordinated events programme between the University, departments and the Doctoral School. The Students' Union understands our club nights and evening events do not interest the majority of research students, but more relaxed events like evening dinners would be of interest to students.
- 6.3** The Students' Union should increase outreach on research student issues and offer more support for students. This could be achieved through our services like the Advice Centre, with an aim of publishing more articles about the research student lifecycle, including the upgrade, submission guidelines and the viva.
- 6.4** The Students' Union should consider the current level of involvement and should further encourage postgraduate research students to become more involved in student groups.
- 6.5** The Students' Union should undertake a review alongside the Postgraduate Research Students Collective as to whether the current Academic Rep system works for postgraduate research students and make improvements where necessary.

# Appendix A.

---

## **PRES Survey Questions, 2019**

---

The table lists the 2019 PRES questions included in Royal Holloway's briefing document about the survey.

### **Supervision.**

- 2.1** My supervisor/s have the skills and subject knowledge to support my research.
- 2.2** I have regular contact with my supervisor/s appropriate for my needs.
- 2.3** My supervisor/s provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities.
- 2.4** My supervisor/s help me identify my training and development needs as a researcher.

### **Resources.**

- 4.1** I have suitable working space.
- 4.2** There is adequate provision of computing resources and facilities.
- 4.3** There is adequate provision of library facilities (including physical and online resources).
- 4.4** I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research.

### **Research Culture.**

- 6.1** I have access to a good seminar programme in my research area.
- 6.2** I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other researchers including research students.
- 6.3** The research community in my research area stimulates my work.
- 6.4** I am aware of opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department.

### **Progression.**

- 8.1** I received an appropriate induction to my research degree programme.
- 8.2** I understand the requirements and deadlines for formal monitoring of my progress.
- 8.3** I understand the required standard for my thesis.
- 8.4** The final assessment procedures for my degree are clear to me.

### **Responsibilities.**

- 10.1** My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students.
- 10.2** I understand my responsibilities towards me as a research degree student.

- 10.3** I am aware of my supervisor's responsibilities towards me as a research student.
- 10.4** Other than my supervisor/s, I know who to approach if I am concerned about any aspect of my degree programme.

### **Research Skills.**

- 12.1** My skills in applying appropriate research methodologies, tools and techniques have developed during my programme.
- 12.2** My skills in critically analysing and evaluating findings and results have developed during my programme.
- 12.3** My confidence to be creative or innovative has developed during my programme.
- 12.4** My understanding of 'research integrity' (e.g. rigour, ethics, transparency, attributing to the contribution of others) has developed during my programme.

### **Professional Development.**

- 14.1** My ability to manage projects has developed during my programme.
- 14.2** My ability to communicate information effectively to diverse audiences has developed during my programme.
- 14.3** I have developed contacts of my own professional development during my programme.

### **Teaching Opportunities.**

- 17.** Please indicate whether you have undertaken paid (or equivalent) teaching work at your institution during your research degree programme (e.g. as a Graduate Teaching Assistant or Graduate Demonstrator).
- 17.a** To what extent do you agree that you have been given appropriate support and guidance for your teaching?
- 17.b** Did you receive formal training for your teaching? (e.g. teacher/lecturer training schemes or staff development classes run by your institution, a PGCert course)

### **Overall Experience.**

- 18.1** Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme.
- 18.2** I am confident that I will complete my research degree programme within my institution's expected timescale.

### **Wellbeing.**

- 22.1** Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?
- 22.2** Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?
- 22.3** Overall, to what extent do you feel the things you do in your life are worthwhile?
- 22.4** Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?

### **Motivations for Study.**

- 24.** The main motivation for me pursuing a research degree programme was:

### **Career Aspirations.**

- 25.** What type of career do you have in mind when you complete your research degree?

### **Language Skills.**

- 36.** When you started your programme, did you consider yourself to be fluent in the language you are taught in?

### **Current Employment.**

- 39** Are you currently in paid employment?
- 39.a** If yes, how many hours of paid employment do you undertake in a typical week (term time)?

### **Any intention to leave studies.**

- 41.** Have you considered, for any reason, leaving your postgraduate research degree?

# Appendix B.

---

## The Postgraduate Research Experience at Royal Holloway.

---

The table below lists the 15 questions in the order that they appeared on the survey.

- 1.** Does the College provide you with suitable resources and working space? Please explain how.
- 2.** Does the College provide you with suitable training support? Please explain how.
- 3.** How frequently do you contact/meet with your supervisor/s? Do you feel like they make themselves available to discuss your research?
- 4.** Do you feel like your supervisor is invested in your research advancement? Please explain how.
- 5.** Have you encountered problems or difficulties with your supervisor/s, whether personal or professional? If so, did you report any issues to the College?
- 6.** Do you feel like your department and supervisor/s offer you mental health and wellbeing support? Please explain how.
- 7.** If you have ever used the College mental health wellbeing services, what was your experience using these services?
- 8.** What do the College's mental health and wellbeing services NOT provide that you would like to be made available?
- 9.** When you began your research degree, did you have a clear career goal, and has this changed?
- 10.** Do you feel like your department and supervisor/s provide career support for a variety of pathways in academic and non-academic roles? Please explain how.
- 11.** If you have ever attended any careers talks or events run by the College Careers Service, what was your experience?
- 12.** What sort of careers support would you like to see made available by your department or the College that isn't already offered?
- 13.** Are you satisfied with the experience of your research degree so far? Please explain how.
- 14.** What role do you think the Students' Union should play for postgraduate research students?
- 15.** Is there anything we haven't covered in this survey that either causes you frustration or acts as a barrier to your experience as a postgraduate research student? Please explain.

# Works Cited.

---

The Higher Education Commission, Postgraduate Education - An Inquiry by the Higher Education Commission,(Autumn 2012)<<https://www.policyconnect.org.uk/hec/research/report-postgraduate-education>> [accessed 20 June 2019].

Metcalf, Dr Janet, Dr Sally Wilson and Professor Katia Levecque, Exploring wellbeing and mental health and associated support services for postgraduate researchers(2018)Vitae,<<https://re.ukri.org/documents/2018/mental-health-report/>> [accessed 13 June 2019].

NUS and the 1752 Group, Power in the academy: staff sexual misconduct in UK higher education, (2018) <[https://web.unican.es/unidades/igualdad/SiteAssets/guia-de-recursos/acoso/NUS\\_staff\\_student\\_misconduct\\_report.pdf](https://web.unican.es/unidades/igualdad/SiteAssets/guia-de-recursos/acoso/NUS_staff_student_misconduct_report.pdf)> [accessed 20 June 2019]

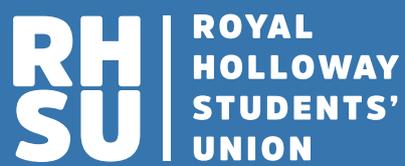
Office for Students, 'About the NSS', <<https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/about.php#:~:targetText=Aimed%20at%20mainly%20final%2Dyear,course%20at%20their%20university%2Fcollege>> [accessed 15 August 2019] (para. 1 of 10).

Royal Holloway University of London, '2018 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) Results', <<https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/restricted/contensis/iquad/strategicplanning/documents/pdf/pres/2018-pres-analysis-v3.pdf>> [accessed 4 June 2019].

Royal Holloway University of London, '2019 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) Results'. [accessed 3 October 2019].

Royal Holloway University of London, Research Degree Student Handbook 2019/20, (2019)<<https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/doctoral-school/assets/docs/pdf/pgr-student-handbook.pdf>> [accessed 31 October 2019].

Williams, Simon, 2019 Postgraduate Research Experience Survey, Advanced HE, <[https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/AdvanceHE-Postgraduate\\_Research\\_%20Survey\\_%202019\\_1574338111.pdf](https://s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/assets.creode.advancehe-document-manager/documents/advance-he/AdvanceHE-Postgraduate_Research_%20Survey_%202019_1574338111.pdf)> [accessed 8 November 2019]



[@SURHUL](#) / [SU.RHUL.AC.UK](#)