

Making the Most of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)

A Good Practice Guide 2013



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Guide Summary

This guide aims to raise awareness of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) by providing background information on the survey, including the expected timings and guidance on the role of stakeholders during the survey cycle. By raising awareness, this will increase engagement with PRES, ensuring that:

- the data collected is relevant and useful
 - results are used to enhance the experience of postgraduate researchers
 - Faculties, Departments and Professional Services use PRES to benchmark their postgraduate research experience and measure progress.
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General PRES Information

1 Overview of PRES

The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) is a national survey of postgraduate researchers. The results are used to advise enhancements to the postgraduate research experience. PRES is offered to all UK Higher Education Institutions¹ (HEIs), and the University of Strathclyde has participated in this survey since 2007.

The survey is run biennially by the Higher Education Academy (HEA), in order to allow HEIs to:

1. benchmark performance
2. monitor strengths
3. identify areas of improvement to inform positive change.

The aim of PRES is to collect feedback from current postgraduate researchers on their research experience. Each University's results are confidential and so the focus of the survey is to inform and drive continual enhancements of the postgraduate research experience rather than for publicity or as a 'health check' of current provision.

After the survey closes, the national aggregated results are published and made available via the HEA website². In addition, each institution will receive a standard benchmark report in June 2013 which, for Strathclyde, will include statistical comparisons against the pre-1992, 1994 and Scottish groups.

¹ In 2011, 102 UK HEIs took part, with 31,202 postgraduate researchers responding to the survey. This corresponds to 32% of the postgraduate research community at these universities.

² www.heacademy.ac.uk/pres

It is then the responsibility of the institution to analyse these results and, with support from the HEA, use them to inform enhancements to the postgraduate research experience.

A general overview of PRES is shown in Figure 1.

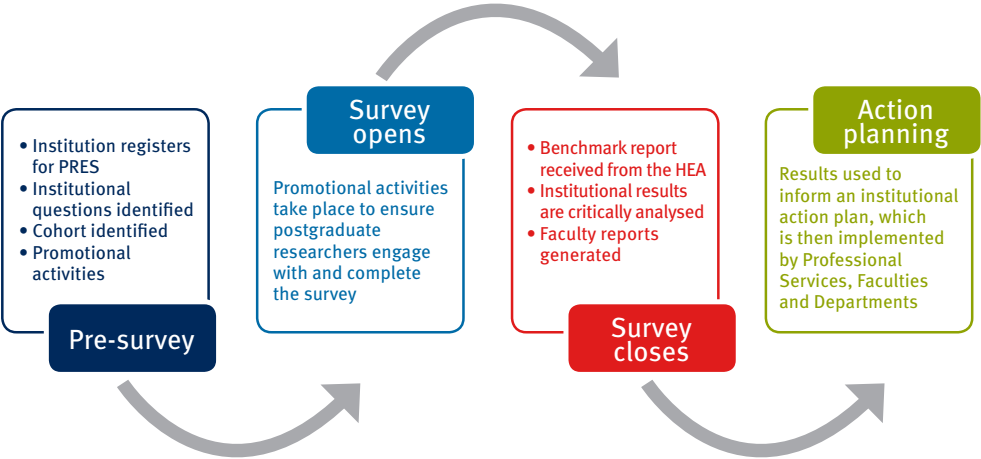


Figure 1: PRES cycle.

2 Benefits of PRES³

In summer 2012, HEIs who had previously participated in PRES were asked their opinions of the survey and the data it provided⁴. The top three reasons institutions cited for participating in PRES were to:

- identify specific areas to enhance the postgraduate experience (94% of respondents)
- assess researchers' perceptions of the quality of research degree programmes (67% of respondents)
- assess the equality of experience and/or opportunities across the postgraduate researcher population (58% of respondents).

The respondents also identified that, as a result of PRES, significant enhancements had been made across areas of the research experience, including:

- how the institution responded to postgraduate researchers' feedback
- the research environment
- opportunities to develop a range of transferable skills
- opportunities to develop a range of research skills
- guidance on institutional standards/expectations for research degree programmes
- teaching opportunities and support
- supervisory support and guidance
- career guidance and support.

The impact of PRES is therefore considerable, with institutions citing several examples of positive impacts resulting from PRES-informed enhancements. The evidence of impact is strongest in the research environment, followed by teaching opportunities, and transferable skills development opportunities.

³ Data taken from "Using PRES to enhance the experience of postgraduate researchers – A good practice guide" http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/postgraduate/using_pres_to_enhance

⁴ There were 50 responses to this survey. Of those responding, 94% had been involved in PRES 2011 and 80% had been involved in more than one PRES cycle.

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PRES Enhancement Project

In 2012, the HEA commissioned Vitae⁵ to run the PRES Enhancement Project. The aims of this were to:

- collect feedback from participants and stakeholders to ensure that the data PRES generates will be relevant and meaningful to the sector
- establish the extent to which PRES is used to enhance the researcher experience.

The University of Strathclyde participated in this project and contributed a case study to the resulting report, “Using PRES to Enhance the Experience of Postgraduate Researchers – A Good Practice Guide⁶.” The Strathclyde case study, along with case studies from other Universities, illustrated how PGRs and other stakeholders can be engaged throughout the PRES process.

The Vitae Good Practice Guide has since been used to inform Strathclyde’s recommendations for running PRES 2013.



⁵ <http://www.vitae.ac.uk>

⁶ http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/postgraduate/using_pres_to_enhance

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PRES Survey Questions

Up until 2013, the areas explored by the survey were:

- Supervision
- Resources
- Infrastructure
- Intellectual climate
- Goals and standards
- Thesis examination
- Professional and career development
- Roles and responsibilities

For 2013, the survey questions have been updated based on the outcomes from the PRES Enhancement Project. In doing this, the number of questions has been significantly reduced and these now focus on the following areas:

- Supervision
- Resources
- Research culture
- Progress and assessment
- Responsibilities
- Research skills
- Professional development
- Opportunities
- Overall experience

To supplement the standard PRES questions, there is the opportunity for each HEI to tailor the survey to their individual needs by adding questions that would be pertinent to their institution - ensuring that the data produced is as relevant and timely as possible.

PRES at the University of Strathclyde

1 Institutional Support for PRES

At Strathclyde, PRES is operationally managed through collaboration between the Researcher Development Team (based in Research and Knowledge Exchange Services) and the Student Survey Team (based in Student Experience and Enhancement Services). Claire Nimmo, Researcher Development Manager, is Strathclyde's PRES Officer.

The Researcher Development Group (RDG)⁷ has overall responsibility for ensuring PRES-related enhancements are identified and implemented at a University-wide level.

2 PRES 2011 Response Rates

In PRES 2011, the University achieved a 32% response rate from the PGR community. This is lower than in previous years⁸; however, this was due to increasing the cohort size in response to a change in HEA guidance. From 2011, HEA recommended that institutions include postgraduate researchers on all research programmes in the cohort, as opposed to only those registered on a Doctor of Philosophy programme⁹.

For the University, Faculties and Departments to be able to extract the most value from this survey, it is essential that the level of engagement with the survey continually increases to ensure a true representation of opinion, across all disciplines.

⁷ RDG is chaired by the Associate Deputy Principal Knowledge Exchange and Research Enhancement, with membership from the Vice Deans Research, Human Resources and Research and Knowledge Exchange Services.

⁸ In 2009 the response rate was 54%.

⁹ In 2011, 1,838 of PGRs were eligible to complete the survey, compared to 796 in 2009.

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Overview of PRES Process at Strathclyde

The overall timeline is detailed in Table 1. The PRES process and the points covered in Table 1 can be split into the five key phases as shown in Figure 2. Each of these phases will be discussed separately with recommendations as to how the postgraduate researchers need to be engaged with the process at each and every step.



Figure 2: The five key phases of the survey.

| Dates | Stakeholders involved | Details |
|-----------------------------------|--|---|
| December | Researcher Development Team, Student Survey Team | PRES registration documents sent to institutions who have registered an interest |
| January | Researcher Development Team, Student Survey Team | Deadline for signed Collaborative Agreement to be returned to HEA confirming participation |
| January – February | Student Survey Team, Researcher Development Team | Cohort identified |
| | Researcher Development Team | Institutional questions identified |
| | Student Survey Team | Preparation and testing of survey |
| | Researcher Development Team, Student Survey Team | Survey promotion, alerting the Departments to the survey dates |
| March | Student Survey Team | Survey opens and all eligible participants receive a unique survey link by email Distribution of publicity materials to Academic Departments and Professional Services |
| | Researcher Development Team | Promotion of the survey to eligible participants, and all Departments |
| March – May | Student Survey Team | Reminder emails will be sent to participants that have not yet completed the survey Weekly response rate reports sent to all Departments Promotion of the survey to staff through the Weekly Digest Publicising on the University's main Twitter and Facebook accounts |
| | Researcher Development Team, with support from Faculties and Departments | Continued publicising of the survey then survey close in May |
| June | HEA | Benchmarking Report published |
| July – August (and beyond) | Research statistician with support from the Researcher Development Team | Benchmark results analysed and institutional and Faculty reports produced |
| | Researcher Development Team | Reports published and circulated to RDG and Faculty Research Committees |
| | Researcher Development Team | Focus group(s) with PGR community inform development of a University-wide action plan |
| | Researcher Development Team | Institutional action plan published |
| | Professional Services, Faculties and Departments as appropriate | Institutional actions carried out, monitored by Researcher Development Team, reported to RDG and disseminated to Faculties |

3.1 Pre-Survey

Registration and Documentation

The Researcher Development Team and Student Survey Team are responsible for organising registration to the survey and confirming that the University will be participating in the coming survey cycle.

The Student Survey Team will identify the correct cohort, in consultation with the Researcher Development Team, prepare the survey and test the survey software.

Developing Institutional Questions

A small number of additional institutional questions can be included in PRES. These tend to fall into the following categories:

- Giving information on researcher characteristics to help with data analysis
- Awareness of a particular University service
- To check the effectiveness of changes made
- Satisfaction with experiences
- Descriptions of the University.

In previous surveys, Professional Services has driven the development of institutional questions, with input from RDG. It is proposed that the development of institutional questions in future years is done over a longer period of time, with greater stakeholder input. To allow this to happen, PRES must become part of the on-going feedback dialogue with PGRs, for example, via the Postgraduate Researchers' Society and Departmental Staff-Student Committees. The views and opinions raised can be used to influence the additional institutional questions for PRES. In addition, Faculty Research Committees should suggest any questions that they have identified to provide useful data.

The Researcher Development Team will collate the information from stakeholders involved, with RDG acting as the final decision-makers on which questions will be added. These questions will then be sent to the Student Survey Team to input into the survey.

An outline of the recommended process for developing institutional questions for inclusion in PRES is shown in Figure 3.

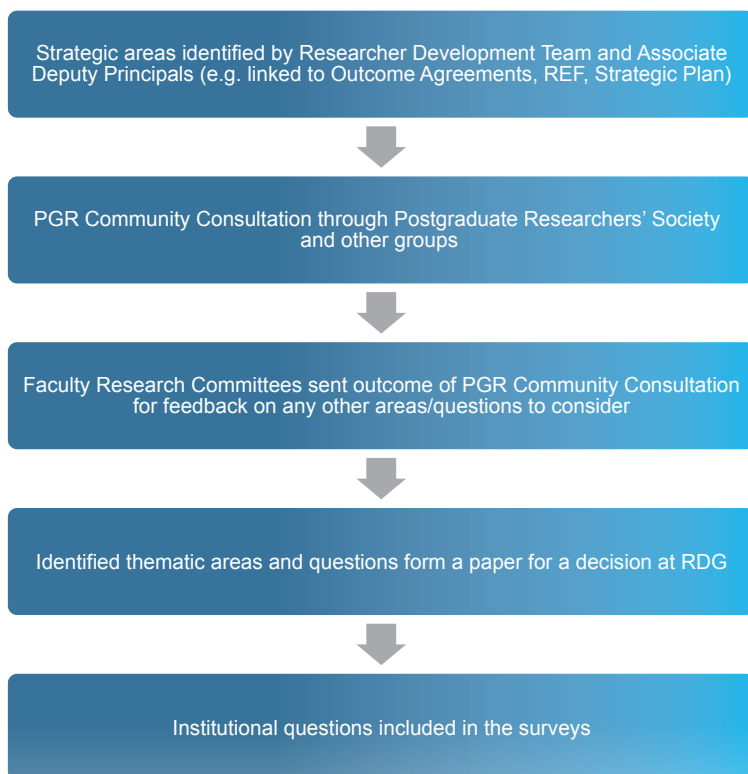


Figure 3: Institutional question development.

3.2 During Survey – Increasing the Response Rate

Previous methods used to inform/remind PGRs of the survey have included:

- Initial email from the Student Survey Team, with follow up reminder emails (only to those who have not already responded). An additional reminder sent from the Student Survey Team on behalf of the Associate Deputy Principal, Professor David Littlejohn.
- Use of the University's main Twitter and Facebook accounts to promote the survey.
- PRES survey reminders feature in GradNews – the Researcher Development Team's monthly e-newsletter.
- Posters advertising PRES are sent to Departments to allow them to advertise the survey locally.
- Running a Survey Lounge for PGRs to come and complete the survey on campus in a dedicated PC lab, with refreshments provided.
- A prize draw for respondents and a charitable donation to the University's Malawi Fund for every response received.

To increase participation, additional methods for advertising PRES 2013 will include:

- Engaging with the newly formed Postgraduate Researchers' Society to advertise the survey and its benefits to students.
- The Researcher Development Team's new social media channels (Facebook and Twitter) will be used to promote PRES.
- Weekly response rates will be analysed and returned to Faculties and Departments.
- Information on PRES and the benefits to the PGR's participating in PRES will be highlighted at any PGR events up to and during the survey period.
- Where Departments have staff-student committees, focus groups or feedback mechanisms in place, PRES should be highlighted to the PGR populations at these events.
- Where Departments have social media channels, these should be used to remind researchers of the survey.

In addition to the methods above, as an extra incentive to increase engagement, all postgraduates completing the survey will be entered into a prize draw. The prize in 2013 will be a £250 travel award to contribute to academic conference attendance.

3.3 Data Analysis

Data will be provided in a number of forms:

- Benchmark report from the HEA
- University data compared to the national aggregate (all respondents minus the University of Strathclyde)
- University data analysed against 2007, 2009 and 2011 results
- Faculty analysis

There are clear advantages to also analysing the data at a Departmental/ Discipline Level. King's College London reported that this allowed them to identify Departmental variations, which then enabled a targeted response to enhance these areas³. However, until the response rate increases sufficiently, this is not appropriate, as a higher number is required to make the statistics viable¹⁰.

Northumbria University takes this analysis further, providing a tool that allows the results to be made “available by year and filterable either by academic school or by key PGR student profile (e.g. programme type, mode, home/ overseas fee status, year of study)”³ allowing the relevant academic schools and departments to monitor their progress compared to previous surveys.

The aim is that the previous recommendations and methods (sections 3.1.2 and 3.2) will increase the University of Strathclyde's response rate sufficiently to allow the data to be analysed on this detailed scale.

¹⁰ Only 38% of universities that responded to a HEA survey analysed results at a department/discipline level and 36% by personal characteristics. In several cases, the respondents stated that the size of the researcher population or a low response rate as the reasons why this was not carried out.

3.4 Action Planning

Current Methods

Participation in PRES provides institutions, such as Strathclyde, with the evidence and insight to improve the research experience and target development and resources at the areas that the researchers feel require additional improvements or support. At the University of Strathclyde, the PRES results form an action plan, presented as a paper to be discussed by the Researcher Development Group (RDG).

In 2011, there were 16 different actions proposed. These focussed on the areas identified by the researchers as requiring additional support. Examples of the positive actions taken include:

- Providing training in research project management as part of the RDP to support the researchers to feel more confident about managing their research project
- Revising the PGR Monitoring System to increase understanding of the monitoring requirements and enhance the process to make it more student-centred
- The introduction of a Postgraduate Festival in 2012, led by the University of Strathclyde's Students' Association¹¹, one of the many events planned to encourage researchers to feel integrated within the research community.

¹¹ <http://www.strathstudents.com>

Further Recommendations for 2013

It is important that the postgraduate researchers and other stakeholders are engaged at every stage of the survey process. The case studies from the Vitae Good Practice Guide⁶ show that this can be achieved through Postgraduate Representatives being involved in committees (at various levels, Figure 4) to input into all the action planning levels. In addition, forum meetings have also been of benefit:

“Not only is this meeting useful in assuring students that the results are acted on by the university, but it gives students the opportunity to propose additional analysis that would be helpful to understanding the responses and, importantly, to propose actions that could be taken to improve or enhance the experience.” *Cardiff University Case Study*³



Figure 4: Different action planning layers and student involvement.

In practice, this will be achieved at Strathclyde by:

- engaging with the Postgraduate Researchers' Society as the representative PGR body, to input into the institution-wide Action Plan (including actions for Professional Services) via the PRES Officer
- developing Faculty Action Plans, ensuring research students have sufficient opportunity to input into the process to allow additional Faculty Actions to be identified.

If response rates are sufficient to allow Departmental analysis, it will be expected that Departments' Postgraduate Representatives will input into a Departmental Action Plan.

The PRES Officer and Researcher Development Team will collate and hold copies of the institutional and Faculty Action Plans.

3.5 Post-Survey Feedback

It is essential that the feedback loop is closed and that researchers are made aware of the actions proposed in the action plan(s). In 2011 these actions were communicated to researchers in the style of “You said... We did...” on the RDP webpages^{12,13}. A similar approach was adopted by some of the other universities included in the Good Practice Guide³.

While the “You said... We did...” approach adopted was useful and will continue, additional recommendations for making PGRs aware of the impact of their PRES participation include:

- Communicating action plans to the research community via the Postgraduate Researchers’ Society and other committees with PGR representation, including Departments’ Staff-Student Liaison Committees (informed by the University of Bath case study).
- Providing a further progress update report one year on (as in the University of Birmingham case study). The highlights/key points of this report can be used when advertising the following survey.

When Strathclyde adopts these approaches, it is hoped researchers will become more aware of the impact of their participation in PRES. If the researchers can clearly see the actions being taken as a result of their participation in a survey, it is expected that this will encourage better participation in future surveys.

In addition, the case studies below highlight a further two methods for disseminating the action plan and feedback:

- The University of Birmingham’s “Student Rep Handbook” strongly advised Postgraduate Student Representatives to analyse the PRES reports in order to understand the issues of the community they are representing.
- The University of Herefordshire incorporates the PRES results and impacts in their Research Degree Supervisory training programme, to make sure that new supervisors are aware of PRES and understand the key issues the research community is facing.

It would be beneficial to adopt similar approaches at Strathclyde and these will be explored by RDG. Faculties and Departments are also encouraged to read the Vitae Good Practice Guide and implement other mechanisms and enhancements⁶.

12 <http://www.strath.ac.uk/rdp/researchersurveys/>

13 <http://www.strath.ac.uk/yousaidwedid/>

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Conclusion

By adopting the recommendations in this report, the University of Strathclyde can ensure that postgraduate researchers and the institution obtain the most value from PRES, enhancing the research experience aligned to the Strategic Plan and the Scottish Funding Council Outcome Agreement.

Additional Resources

Further information about PRES can be found on the [The Higher Education Academy webpages](#)¹⁴.

Within the University, both the [Student Survey Team](#)¹⁵ and the [Researcher Development Team](#)¹⁶ can provide additional information on PRES.

The full analyses of previous years' results are available to University of Strathclyde's staff and students on the [R&KE Portal](#)¹⁷. The results are also analysed by Faculty, with the Faculty reports available from your Faculty Manager or the PRES Officer.

A summary of University-wide enhancements made in response to the 2011 survey results can be found on the [RDP Surveys Webpage](#)¹².

This Good Practice Guide will be reviewed and updated periodically. When a new version is created, the Guide will be re-circulated to key PRES contacts in Faculties.

14 www.heacademy.ac.uk/pres

15 <http://www.strath.ac.uk/sees/student-surveys/>

16 <http://www.strath.ac.uk/rdp/abouttherdp/>

17 <https://moss.strath.ac.uk/research/resportal/rdp/Research%20Careers%20Enhancement%20Pages/Strategy%20and%20Policy.aspx>

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