School of Informatics Response to 2023 PRES Results

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High-level overview

The feedback from postgraduate research (PGR) students in the School of Informatics (SoI) can be set into context by considering the overall satisfaction expressed by PGR students across the University as a whole. From 2015-2019 around 80% of PGR students agreed that their "overall experience" was good. However, that fell to below 70% during the pandemic years, but in 2023 returned to just under 78% (response rate 24.5%).

Over the same period, the overall experience score for SoI was consistently in the mid-70s during 2015-2019, taking a slight dip during 2021, and then rising sharply in 2023 (albeit on a low response rate of only 16.2%).

The overall trends and scores in the 10 themes are shown below, for both the University as a whole and for the School of Informatics.
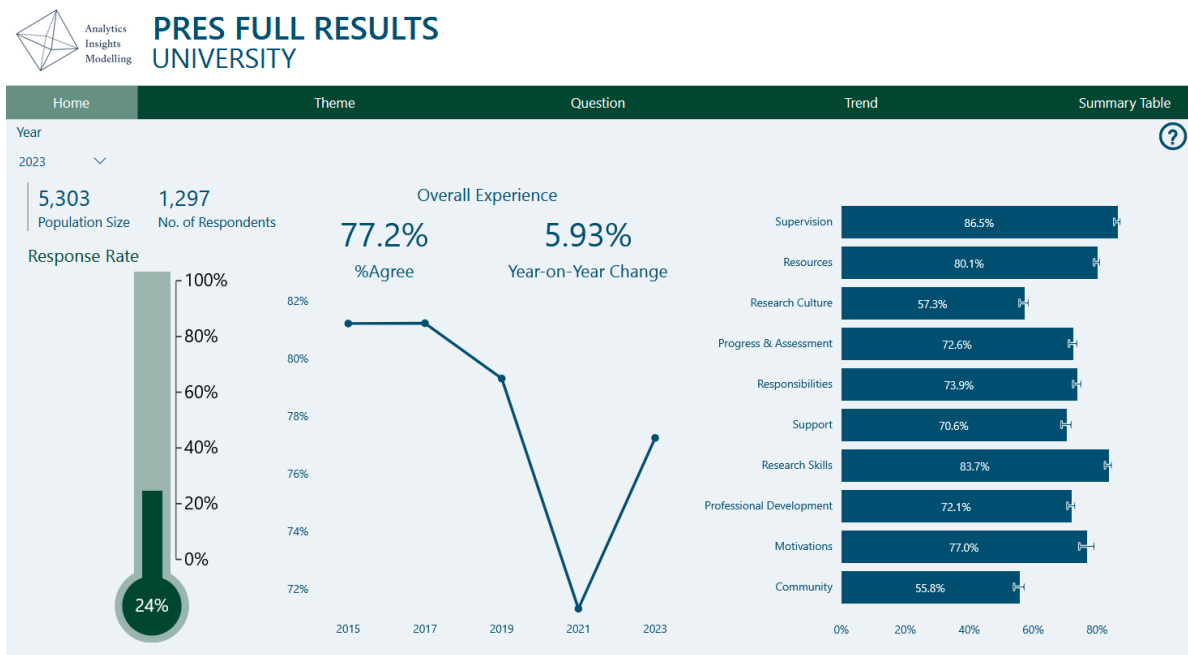

Figure 1 – Full PRES results for the University of Edinburgh as a whole

Figure 2 - Full PRES results for the School of Informatics

Differences from previous survey

The SoI scores in each theme are generally higher than in the previous 2021 survey, as shown in below. In particular, the increases in levels of satisfaction in the themes of Resources (+10.8%), Professional Development (+9.9%), and Research Skills (+7.8%) are significant. But there are increases across the board except in the theme of Responsibilities (-1.3%).
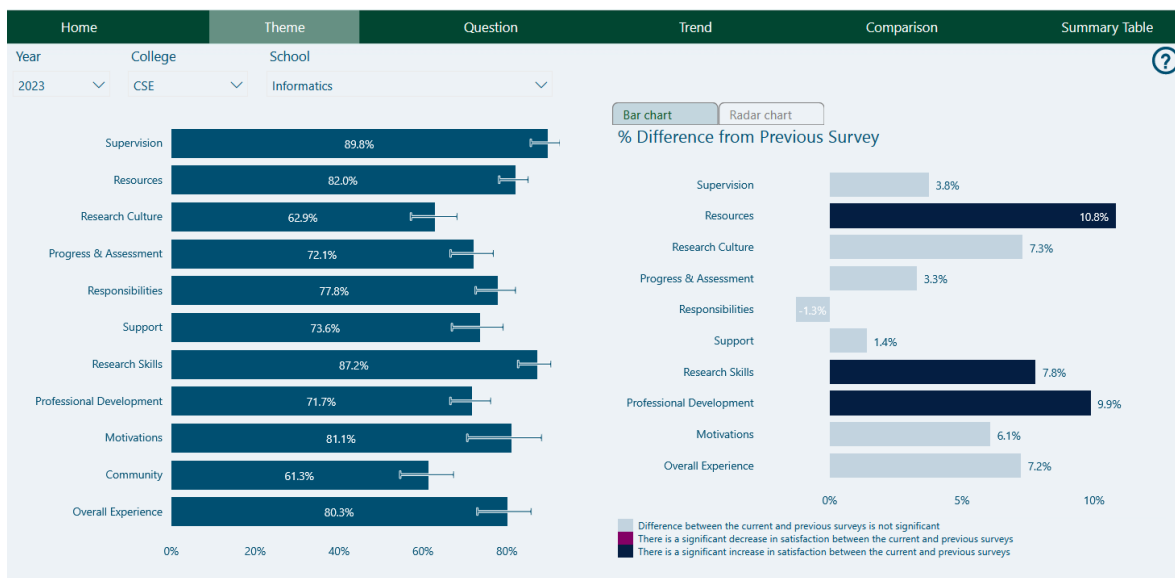

Figure 3 - Analysis of differences from previous survey, by theme (School of Informatics)

Responsibilities theme (lowest score)

The reduction in the SoI score for the Responsibilities theme is similar to the result observed across the University as a whole (-1.0%). This arises from an overall 5.9% drop in agreement with the statement "*My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students*", which is a drop of 11.8% in SoI (although the small SoI sample size of only two specific comments renders

that result "not significant" in the PRES report). Across the wider university, however, the lack of satisfaction in relation to feedback appears to be due to issues in some schools concerning finance-related problems with People & Money (particularly stipend payments). These issues did not arise in SoI, as the school fully implemented the UKRI increase in stipend payments for all our funded students (not only those funded by UKRI), and SoI's graduate school anticipated issues with continuity of stipend payments in advance of the transition to payments via P&M and were therefore able to track and respond to issues rapidly.

Although this was our lowest scoring theme, in comparison with other Russell Group universities, SoI's score in this theme were slightly above the group average (+1.9%).

Supervision theme (highest score)

This was SoI's highest scoring theme (89.0%), with four specific comments all of which were highly positive about students' experiences of PGR supervision. In comparison with other Russell Group universities, SoI's score in this theme is slightly above the group average (+3.8%).

Resources theme (most comments)

Although SoI scored highly in the theme of resources (82.0%), this was an area with a number of detailed comments from students. The two key concerns were:

1. Student offices and shared desks
2. Compute provision

There is insufficient space available to offer each student their own desk, and instead we have a system of allocating a specific room to a group of students who then share the desk space in that room. Typically, we have a ratio of 1.6 students to each desk. However, surveys of desk usage have shown that average occupancy of desks during normal working hours is below 30% (even before the shared desk policy came into effect), although this does vary from room to room. Students with specific equipment needs or with a relevant schedule of adjustments, can request a fixed desk to be allocated. Other issues include the lack of privacy, due to the glass walls, and noise (*e.g.*, in Bayes open plan areas). At the same time, we saw a 28.4% increase in the number of students who agreed that they had suitable space when working remotely (81.7%).

There was one respondent who felt that compute resources were in short supply and complained about the length of time needed to procure new machines. The school maintains a number of GPU compute clusters, and research groups often operate their own systems.

In comparison with other Russell Group universities, SoI's score in this theme is slightly below the group average (-2.7%) but the difference is considered not significant.

Health and wellbeing

Students commented that they felt that mental health support from the University was too difficult to access, that the strikes have been a concern, that lack of resources has been stressful (conference attendance costs, shared desks), and that the cost-of-living crisis has been a big concern for some.

Overall experience

There were many positive comments from PGR students in SoI on the quality of supervision, their academic freedom, the sense of community, the wide range of facilities, and the opportunities for interactive with people during their degree. There is also evidence from the latest PRES that some PGR students are not happy about shared desk provision. This is a topic that we will continue to work on improving, within our given constraints on space.