

Postgraduate research (PGR) students are a vital group in national research and innovation in Ireland. Every two years, PGR StudentSurvey.ie invites responses from master's-by-research and PhD students about their experiences of higher education in Ireland, including their academic, personal, and social development. This article summarises the latest survey results and provides a brief analysis of the findings.

Purpose

Every two years, PGRStudentSurvey.ie (Irish Survey of Student Engagement for Postgraduate Research Students; Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn do Mhic Léinn Taighde Iarchéime) invites responses from master's-by-research and PhD students about their experiences of higher education in Ireland, including their academic, personal, and social development. In 2021, 3,541 students in 21 higher education institutions (HEIs) participated.

There is also a second survey, StudentSurvey.ie (the Irish Survey of Student Engagement; Suirbhé na hÉireann ar Rannpháirtíocht na Mac Léinn), designed for first- and final-year undergraduate students and taught postgraduate students (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021b).

It is essential for Ireland's national research system that those who carry out research here, from the very beginnings of their career, receive an educational experience that equips them with the capability and confidence to conduct their research to the highest possible standards. Underpinning the quality of postgraduate research degree provision is Ireland's National Framework for Doctoral Education. A complementary Framework of Good Practice for Research Degree Programmes, launched by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), is organised around the key principles in the National Framework for Doctoral Education.

The information gathered in PGR StudentSurvey.ie will greatly advance the objectives of these policies, by providing key evidence for both HEIs themselves and the broader higher education and research and innovation system to enhance the quality of postgraduate research degree provision in Ireland.

Early evidence from organisations such as QQI (2020), USI (2020), and AHEAD (2020) suggests that the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of students in higher education has been significant

Selected Results from the PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2021

The impact of Covid-19 on postgraduate research students



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and far-reaching. This and institutional evidence led the StudentSurvey.ie steering group to add specific Covid-19-related questions to the 2021 survey.

Results

Results of questions specifically on the impact of Covid-19

In their responses, postgraduate research students felt supported by ongoing effective and timely communication (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021a). Around a third said Covid-19 affected their funding or their ability to fund themselves during their research. Around two thirds reported adequate access to the on-campus facilities they required to engage with their research.

Fewer respondents to PGR StudentSurvey.ie than StudentSurvey.ie said they had a suitable study environment at home, though slightly more said they felt connected with their HEI. See Table 1 for details.

Do you agree or disagree with the following statements about the impact Covid-19 has had on your experience?		All Students	Master's by Research	PhD
My higher education institution provides me with ongoing effective and timely communication.	Somewhat/definitely disagree	16.8%	17.0%	15.5%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	83.3%	83.0%	84.5%
Covid-19 has affected my funding or my ability to fund myself during my research.	Somewhat/definitely disagree	64.4%	64.1%	65.7%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	35.6%	35.8%	34.3%
I have adequate access to the on-campus facilities required to engage with my research.	Somewhat/definitely disagree	40.8%	41.5%	37.1%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	59.2%	58.5%	62.9%
I have a suitable study environment at home (space to work, internet access, computer, etc.).	Somewhat/definitely disagree	33.1%	33.5%	30.3%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	67.0%	66.5%	69.7%
I feel connected to my higher education institution despite the restricted access to campus.	Somewhat/definitely disagree	42.2%	42.9%	38.1%
	Somewhat/definitely agree	57.8%	57.1%	61.8%

Table 1: PGR StudentSurvey.ie responses nationally

When asked 'How has Covid-19 most impacted on your research?', a theme emerged of disrupted access to necessary facilities, including labs, library, specialist materials, workspace, and data collection. Impact on time was also frequently cited: there were delays to research plans, everything took longer, and there was less time for research. One other noteworthy theme is the impact on their environment, particularly the loss of their collegiate environment. All themes and subthemes are presented in Table 2.

Themes	n	Subthemes	n
Disruption in access to:	1,404	Labs	439
		Library/archives	218
		Campus workspace/facilities	167
		Specialist materials/equipment	91
		Data collection/fieldwork	489
Environment	822	Collegiate environment (inc. colleagues, collaborators)	459
		Contact with supervisor/academic staff/support staff	161
		Working from home (WFH) environment unsuitable	202
Time	706	Delays/slowed pace	567
		Other commitments drawing on time	139
Personal impact	406	Negative impact on productivity	86
		Negative impact on motivation	131
		Negative impact on mental health (inc. stress and isolation)	189
Other	243	Financial impact	91
		Travel	68
		Positive impact	47
		Other	37
Generally	112	Non-specific impact/overall major revisions	
Not impacted	173		

Table 2: PGR StudentSurvey.ie themes and subthemes for question 1 nationally

Note: Some comments received more than one code.

Financial impacts were not often cited as Covid-19's most significant impacts on PGR students. But when asked 'In what way(s) could your higher education institution improve its support for you during the current circumstances?', financial support was often highlighted as the possible solution. Calls for extensions of time and funding often intersected.

Given the emphasis on disrupted access to necessary facilities in the previous question, it is unsurprising that the solution for these students is greater access to those facilities. PGR students sought more communication, or different messages in the communication they did receive, greater recognition of the exceptional circumstances in which students found themselves, and proportionate compassion from their HEI. All themes and subthemes are presented in Table 3.

Themes	n	Subthemes	n
Increase access to	648	Labs	111
		Library/archives	125
		Campus workspace/facilities	281
		Specialist materials/equipment	25
		Online facilities/software	106
Other supports	495	Connection/networking opportunities	229
		Support for mental health	60
		Support for specific cohorts, e.g. student parents, international students	51
		Other	155
Engagement	426	More communicative (timing and quantity of communications)	244
		Change communications strategy	47
		Response to Covid-19 (inc. vaccination/testing)	62
		Recognition of circumstances and making allowances	73
Finance	355	Reduce/remove costs (inc. waive fees)	79
		More funding/funding opportunities (inc. paying for teaching)	145
		Extension/reallocation of existing funding	131
Research supports	473	Deadline extensions	190
		More/improved supervision	56
		Support for research challenges during pandemic	69
		Supports to WFH (equipment/IT support/costs)	158
Nothing	565	Nothing institution can do to resolve issues	158
		Institution has done all they can	407
Other	54		

Table 3: PGR StudentSurvey.ie themes and subthemes for question 2 nationally

Looking deeper: The impact of Covid-19 on PGR students

The responses from the Covid-19 questions point to significant differences between the Arts, Humanities, and Social Science (AHSS) and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) groups in relation to funding, on-campus facilities, and a suitable study environment at home. In 2021, 63.9% of STEM respondents said they had adequate access to the on-campus facilities required to engage with their research, while only 50.5% of AHSS respondents did.

This correlates with the results for *Research Infrastructure and Facilities*, where STEM respondents again said they had better access to resources and facilities to help them carry out their research (StudentSurvey.ie, 2021c). The pandemic has disrupted all PGR students' capacity to carry out their research, but it may be that STEM students, despite limited access to laboratories and so on, are in a better position to progress their research than AHSS students, who have faced longer library and archive closures, disruptions in access to human participants, and restrictions on fieldwork.

When the source of funding for AHSS and STEM students was examined, 33.8% of AHSS students said they were self-funded, compared to 7.7% of STEM students. Financial factors may bear more heavily on the self-funded AHSS students, causing them to assess their position as regards continuing their studies. This speculation is supported by the finding that 17.3% of AHSS students have considered withdrawing, compared to 12.7% of STEM students. Finally, the results indicate that STEM students have been able to avail of development opportunities during the pandemic more readily than AHSS students, which may mean they are better prepared for their careers after their studies.

The survey results support suggestions from national and international research that female postgraduate research students have been more affected than male PGR students by the pandemic. For instance, 52% of male respondents to PGR StudentSurvey.ie said they have submitted a paper for publication in an academic journal or book, while the figure for female respondents was 46.7%.

Responses to the question on *Overall Experience – Withdrawal* point to significant differences between male and female respondents: 17.5% of female respondents considered withdrawing for personal or family reasons, compared to 13.8% of male respondents. This points to a possible gendered aspect of the Covid-19 pandemic, which could affect the career progression of female PGR students.

This limited preliminary analysis should be interpreted with caution. Future analysis of PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2023 data will allow for more confident comparison of pre-Covid-19 data, data gathered during the pandemic from the 2021 survey, and the post-Covid-19 data anticipated in 2023.

Final remarks

Postgraduate research students are a vital group in national research and innovation in Ireland. In 2018, there were 8,626 permanent academic staff and 2,294 postdoctoral staff (Government of Ireland, 2018). They are outnumbered by the more than 10,000 doctoral and research-master's students in Irish higher education institutions. PGR students are a key cohort currently undertaking valuable research and who will lead on projects in the future.

Significant differences by gender were not evident in the results of PGR StudentSurvey.ie 2019, but suggestions of them appear in the 2021 survey results. Steps must be taken to ensure that such differences are not allowed to emerge as these current early-career researchers progress.

In 2019 and 2021, about 68% of PGR students chose an academic career in higher education as a career aspiration priority, while about 58% chose a research career outside higher education. There is more to be done to equip PGR students with the skills and expectations to work in more settings than academic careers in higher education. Also, in 2021 only 46% said they were satisfied with their work-life balance, down from nearly 56% in 2019. This raises the question of whether the expected workload, working hours, and precarity of researchers should be perpetuated.

The adequacy of the workspace and facilities is understood in practical terms for some, such as the value of having a quiet room to write in. But it also means having the space to learn how to collaborate, to create networks with other early-career researchers, or to develop in the company of more senior researchers. In 2021, 68% said their department provides access to a relevant seminar programme, while 47% said they have frequent opportunities to discuss their research with other research students. The risks of isolation and loneliness increase when PGR students feel they have no network to participate in.

Providers of postgraduate research training should seek to support and empower these early-career researchers, without whom research and innovation in Ireland would be significantly diminished.

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