

## **Vitae South West and Wales Hub Part time Researcher Survey 2011**

*Funded by Vitae Innovate*

### **1. Introduction**

Part-time researchers often undertake their studies at universities that are some distance from their homes; this may be because these institutions offer a specific subject or specialist expertise in which they have an interest.

The experiences of part-time postgraduate researchers (PGRs) can vary depending on the support they receive throughout their studies, their integration into the universities' researcher environment and the resources made available to them from their chosen institution.

In February 2011 the Vitae SWW Hub carried out a survey that was designed to assist Vitae and the universities within the region to clarify the needs of part-time researchers. The survey formed part of the Part-Time Innovate Project and the results were used to provide direction and assist in the decision making process of this project.

The outcome of the survey produced PGR preferences for different courses to be offered by the SWW hub and information on the different levels of PGR community, communication and integration of PGRs across the SWW region.

The survey was sent out by the higher education institutions' (HEIs) PGR support officer and was received by approximately 1130 part-time PGR students resident in the UK. There were 171 responses equating to 15% of those eligible to reply. The survey was open for a relatively short time period, three weeks, because of the need to gather information quickly to progress the project.

The results of the survey are given in section 2.

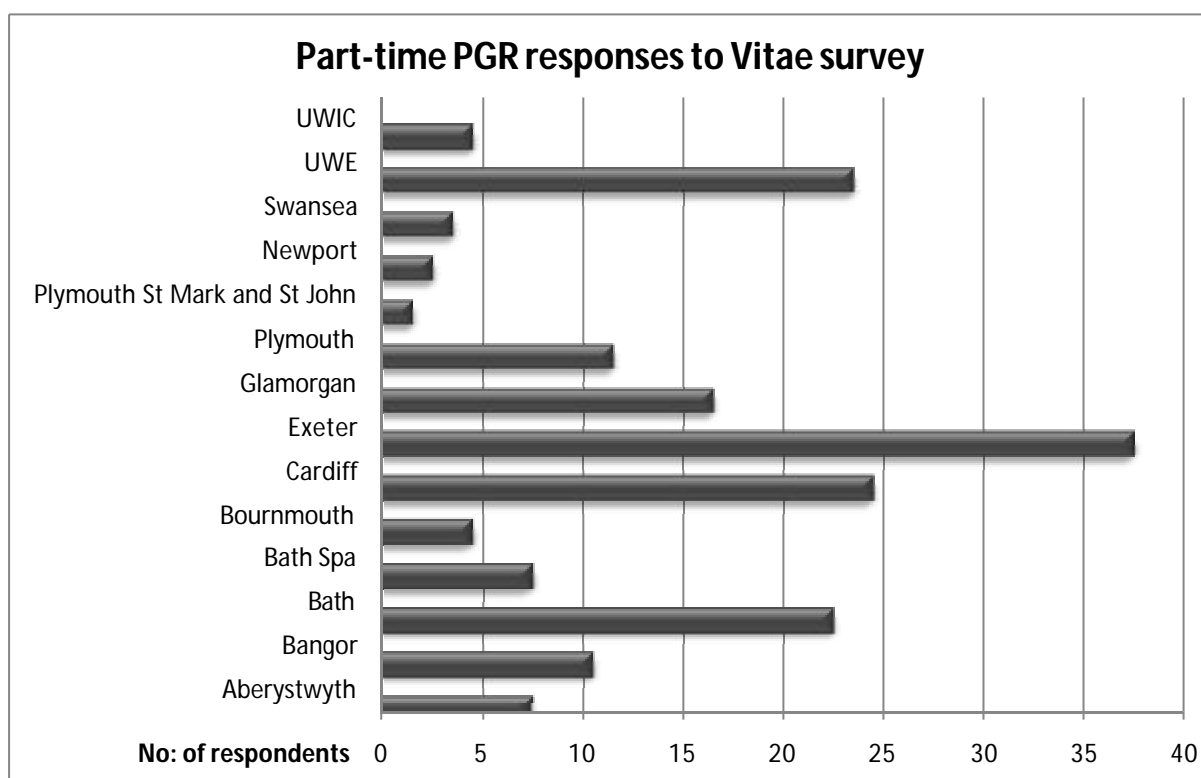
### **2. Results**

#### **2.1 About the Researchers**

To effectively develop a programme of training courses and a support network for researchers, it was important for the Vitae SWW Hub to understand more about who the region's PGRs were, where they lived and what competing priorities they had with their part-time studies.

Figure 1 shows the number of responses by HEIs in the SWW region. The number of responses from each institution is a reflection of the number of students studying there, for example, Exeter has approximately 348 part-time PGRs and this is more than three times the 107 studying at UWIC.

Figure 1 – Responses by Institution



PGRs were asked about their employment status: just under half (48%) were employed full time and a further third (32.2%) were employed part-time. One in ten (9.9%) were retired, while just over 1% were unemployed and not seeking work and 3.5% were unemployed and seeking. Just over 5% selected “other”, of which half were self-employed.

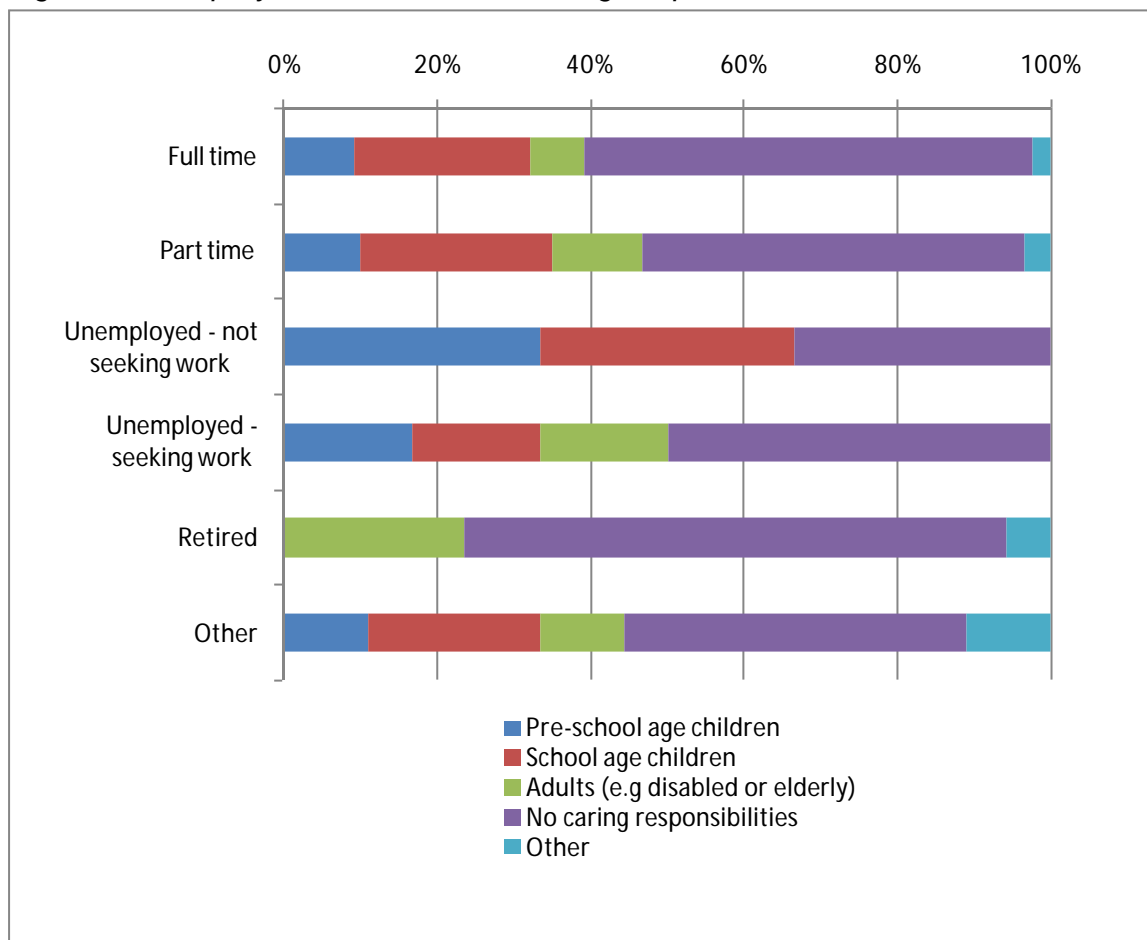
The demographics of the PGRs in SWW region are shown to be similar of those who responded to the 2008 Postgraduate Research Experience (PRES)<sup>1</sup> with most being in full-time work.

An interesting result from the Vitae SW Hub survey is that most of the respondents (101 of 171) do not have any caring responsibilities. Of those with caring responsibilities, 17 had pre-school children; 39 had school-aged children; 19 cared for adults (elderly or disabled). Of the six who selected ‘other’, two named animals and four described their arrangements in more detail.

The relationship between working and caring responsibilities was explored and is shown in Figure 2 below. More than half of those employed full time and those employed part-time did NOT have caring responsibilities.

<sup>1</sup> Understanding the part-time researcher experience, Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC) 2009

Figure 2 – employment status and caring responsibilities

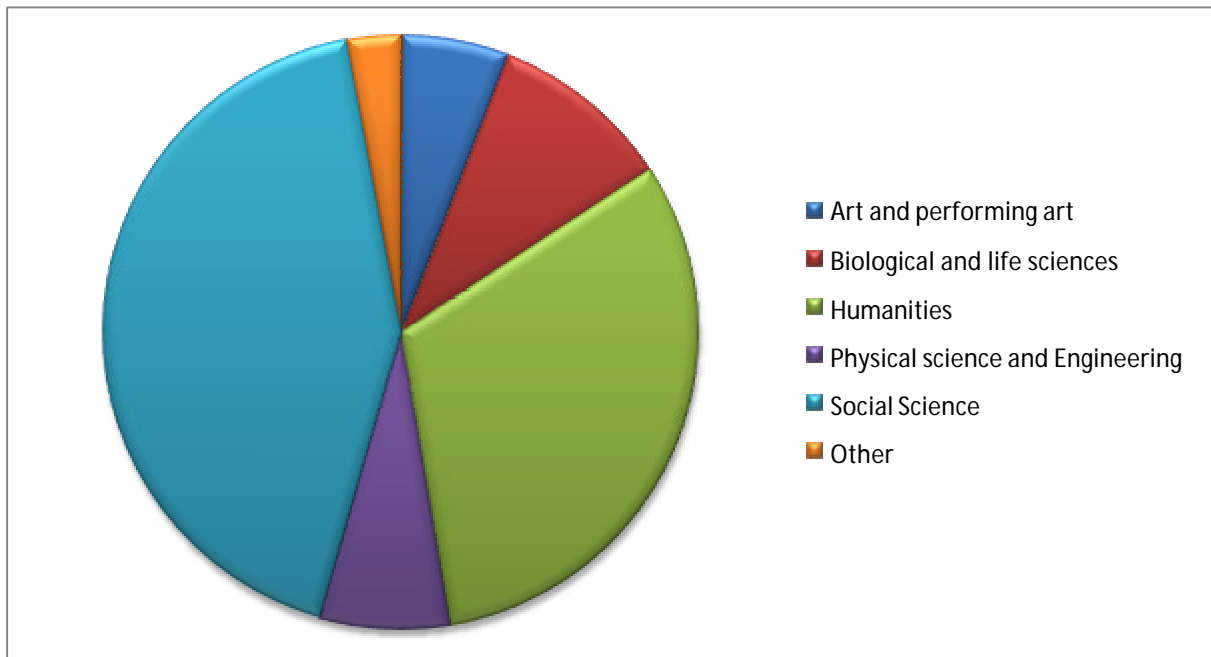


The breakdown of the disciplines shows that the majority of part-time doctorates and MPhils respondents are in the social sciences and the humanities; this can be seen in Figure 3.

This is very different than the breakdown of disciplines of full-time PhD students in the UK, who are largely in physical sciences, biomedical and biological sciences<sup>2</sup>, with less than 15% in arts and humanities and a slightly lower level in the social sciences.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, page 10, “What do PhDs Do - Trends” accessed at <http://www.vitae.ac.uk/cms/files/UKGRAD-WDPD-Trends-Sep-2007.pdf>

Figure 3 – Respondents by discipline



PGRs were also asked to provide their residential postcode, enabling the Vitae SWW Hub to design a support programme to PGRs where they live rather than through their institution. Figure 4 shows the four main regional clusters of part-time PGRs, gathered from the full data set provided by participating HEIs (rather than by this survey).

Training will be provided at the largest four clusters in Bangor, Bristol/ Bath, South Wales and Exeter/ Plymouth. The postcode data also provides a clear indication that the majority of students studying part-time at higher education institutions within the region are also living within the region.

Survey respondents were similar to this full data set which gives some confidence that the views may be representative.

Figure 4 – map of the residential clusters of part-time PGRs in SWW region



## 2.2 Training and Skills Development

The Vitae SWW Hub was aware that it is often difficult for part-time researchers to attend seminars and training courses at their institutions. In order to support these PGRs more effectively the Vitae SWW Hub needed to establish where PGRs felt they required additional training and support and offer courses across the region to fill this gap.

The survey asked PGRs to indicate their level of interest in nine different courses that could be offered across the region. The courses proposed were:

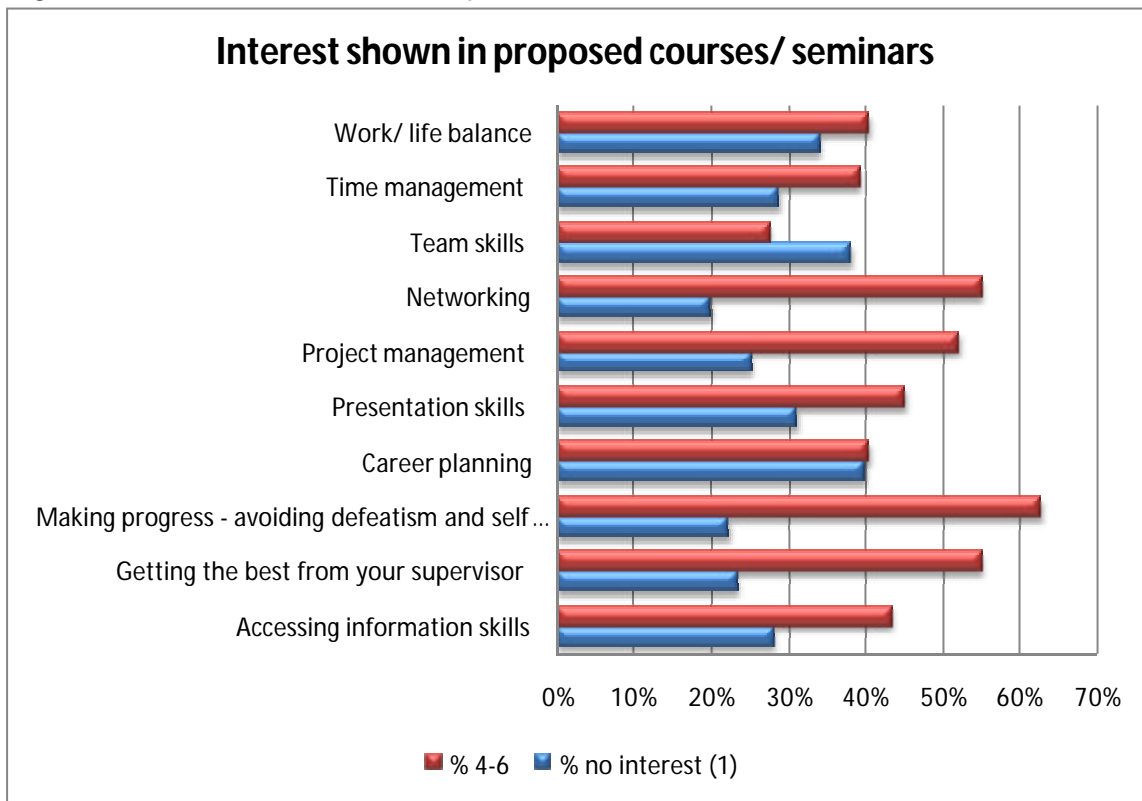
- Accessing information skills
- Getting the best from your supervisor
- Making progress – avoiding defeatism and self sabotage
- Career planning and presentation skills

- Project management
- Networking
- Team skills
- Time management
- Work/ life balance

The results are shown in Figure 5 and it is clear that the courses that PGRs are most interested in undertaking are: Making progress, avoiding defeatism and self sabotage; getting the best from your supervisor; project management; accessing information skills and networking.

Vitae will offer these courses to all students studying in the region to the four clusters identified in section 2.1, these are: Bangor, Bristol/ Bath, Cardiff/Swansea and Exeter/ Plymouth.

Figure 5 – Interest Level in Proposed Courses



PGRs were also offered a supplementary item, “Please indicate any other topics or training courses that may be of interest to you”. Most of the responses to this were discipline specific and may already be offered by the higher education institutions across the region.

Other topics are given below.

“...chairs seminars, teaching undergraduates, research skills, statistics revision and preparing papers for publication...”

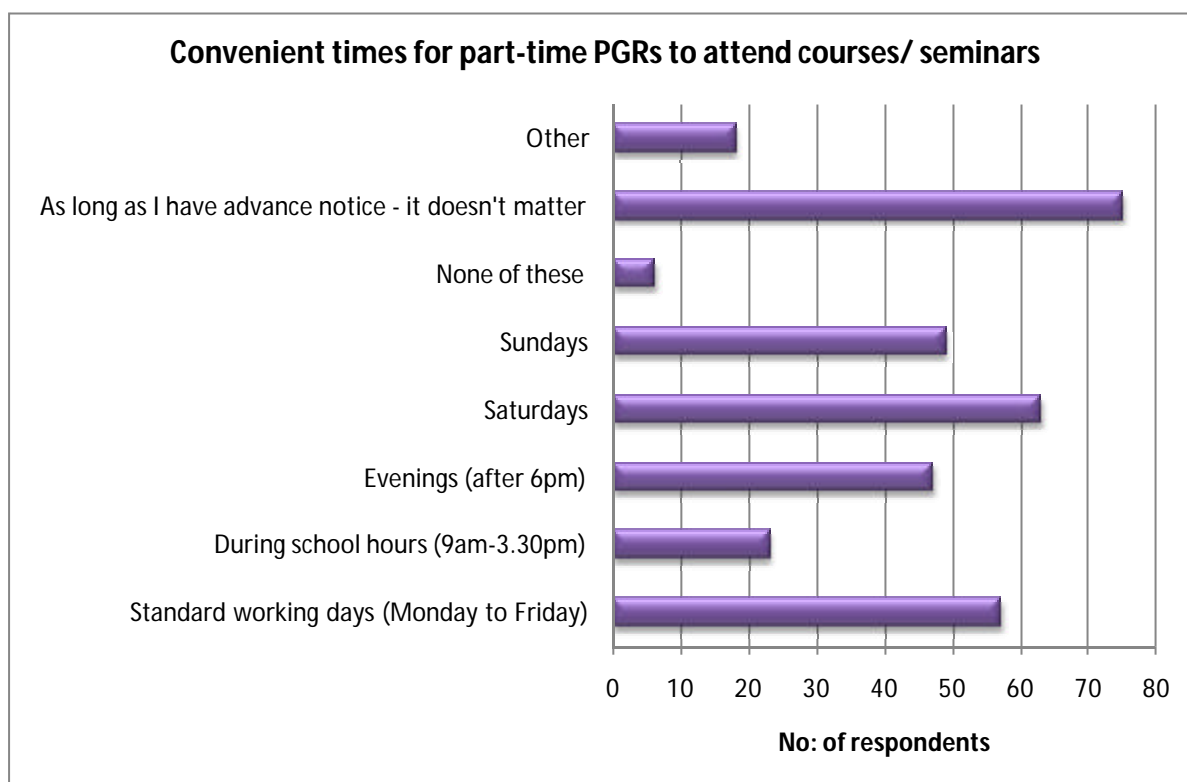
“...getting the most out of university resources, voluntary posts, employment opportunities and interdisciplinary work...”

“...grants for further research...”

“...interview skills, peer review and thesis writing style...”

In addition to the types of courses PGRs were interested in, they were also asked what would be the most convenient time and day for them to attend courses. Figure 6 shows the responses to this question and it is evident from these data that there is no answer that suits all PGRs, but most responded that providing plenty of notice was important.

Figure 6 – Preferences for attendance at training and seminars

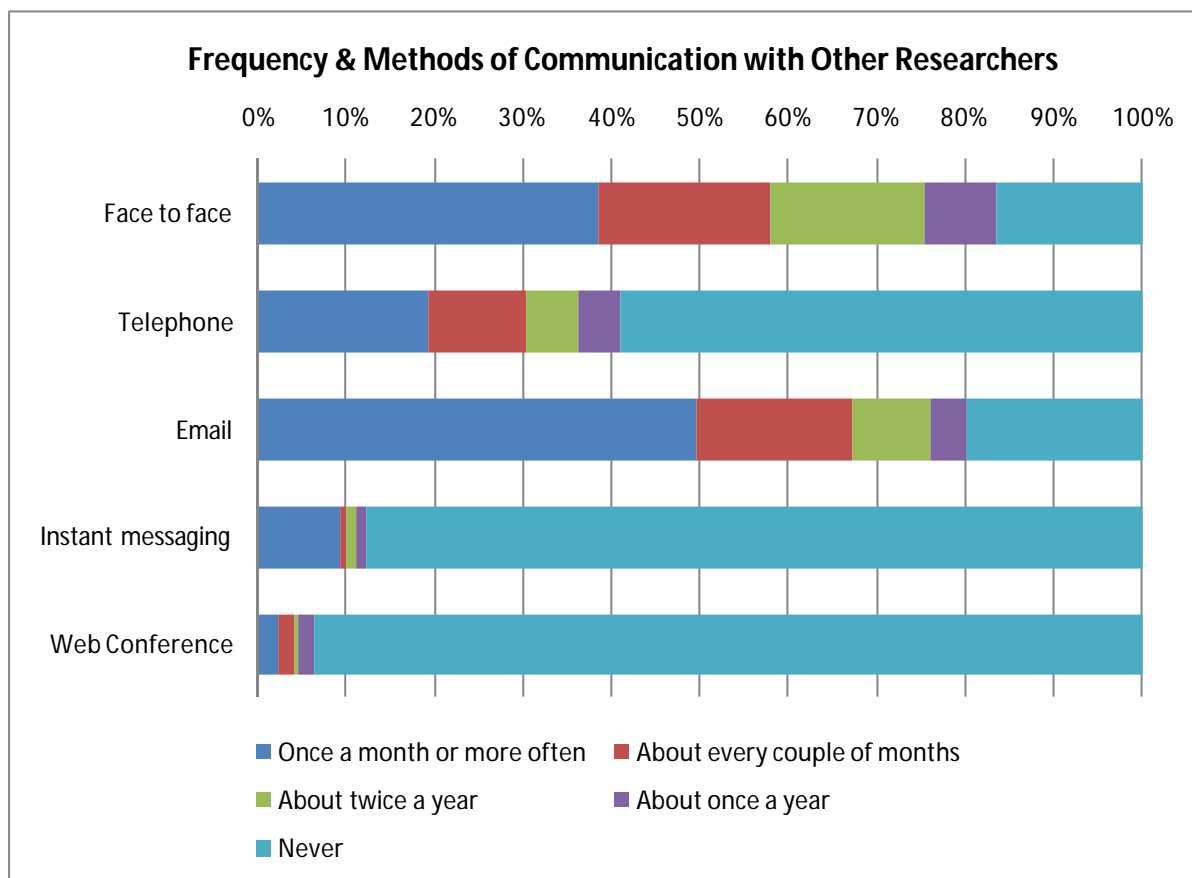


### 2.3 Communication, Integration and Peer Support

Many part-time PGR students report isolation and lack of a peer network as a negative aspect of studying part-time. To understand more about the level of communication with their institutions, supervisors, peers and other researchers, the survey asked a series of questions about frequency of communication and method and the number of researchers each individual part-time PGR knew.

Figure 7 provides a clearer picture of the frequency and method of communication PGRs use with their supervisors; it shows face to face meetings and email to be the main communication methods. The latest technologies including instant messaging and web meetings are used by only a few students.

Figure 7 – methods and frequency of communication with supervisors



The responses from part-time PGRs regarding their contact with supervisors and other researchers have been polarised with both extremes being cited.

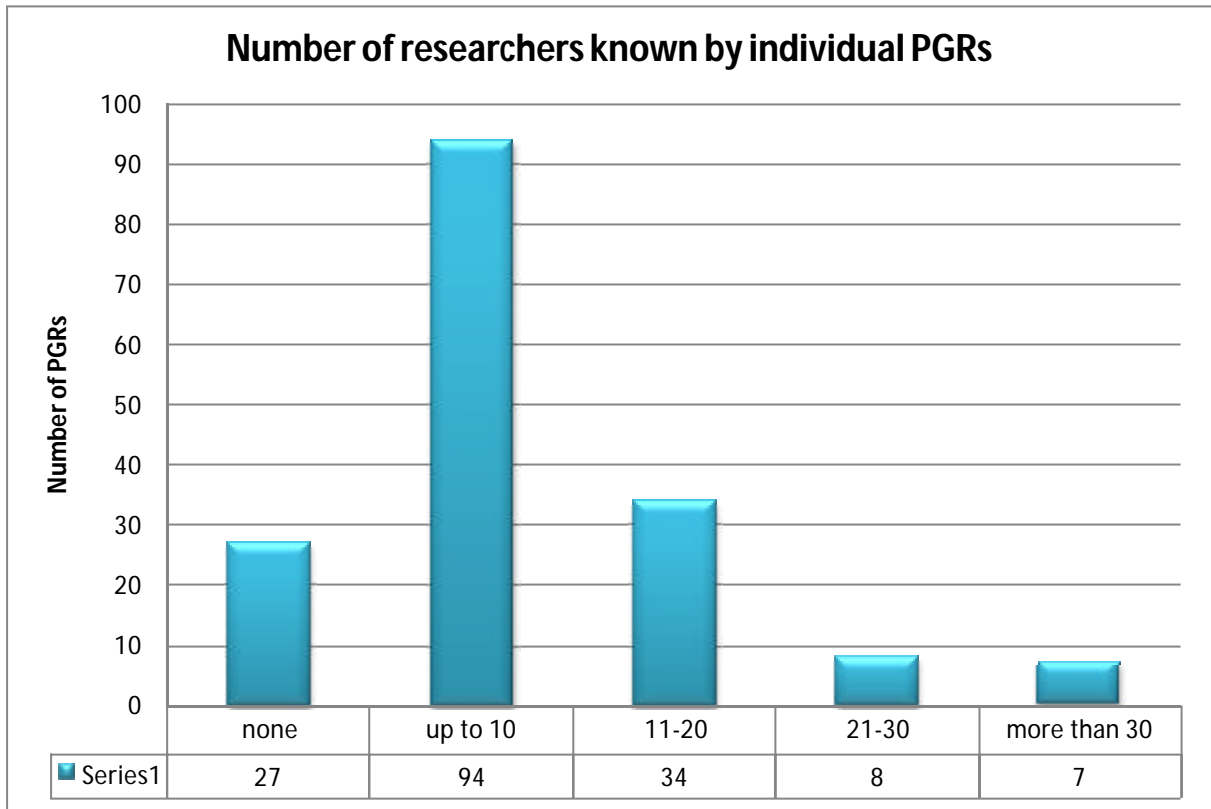
“...pastoral support has been good and supervision very appropriate and understanding of the exigencies of my part-time situation...”

“...the isolation is real...”

Figure 8 indicates the number of other researchers known by individual part-time PGRs. The data reveal that approximately 15% of respondents know no other researchers as peers or friends.

The figure shows that on average part-time PGRs know between 1 and 10 other researchers as students, friends or colleagues. It may be that those students who know more than 20 other researchers are working in research based environments, like universities or research institutes.

Figure 8 – Number of peers and researchers known by respondents



Continuing the theme of contact and integration into the researcher environment, the survey asked a series of questions on opportunities for interaction with other researchers and satisfaction with the level of contact they have with other researchers.

The survey also asked students to respond to the statement “I am confident I will complete my research degree programme more or less within the planned timescale”.

Responses to these questions are given in Figures 9, 10, and 11.

PGR students were asked to provide their level of agreement to two statements (with 1 being strongly disagree and 5 being strongly agree).

14a “My department/ school provides opportunities for social contact with other research students.”

14b “I feel integrated into my department/ school's research community.”

As shown in Figure 9, the majority of students do not think that their department/ school provide good opportunities for socialising with other researchers. However, from the results it can be seen that a larger number (responses 3, 4 and 5) feel integrated into their departments than do not.

Figure 9 – Opportunities for social contact within School/Dept.  
(1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree)

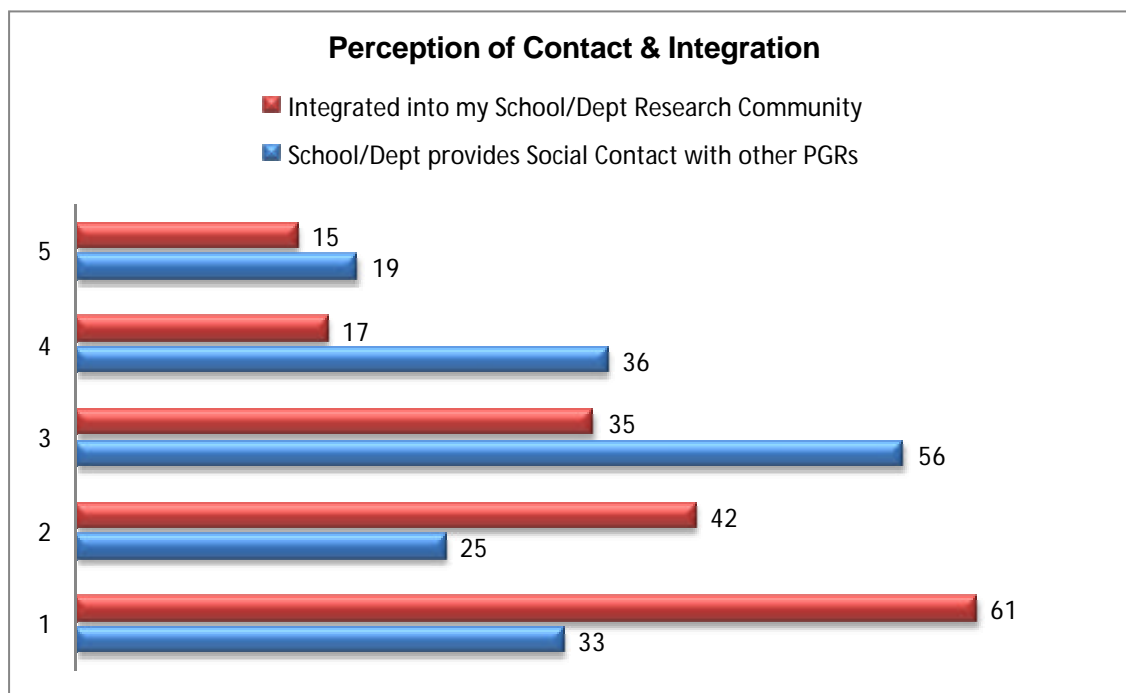
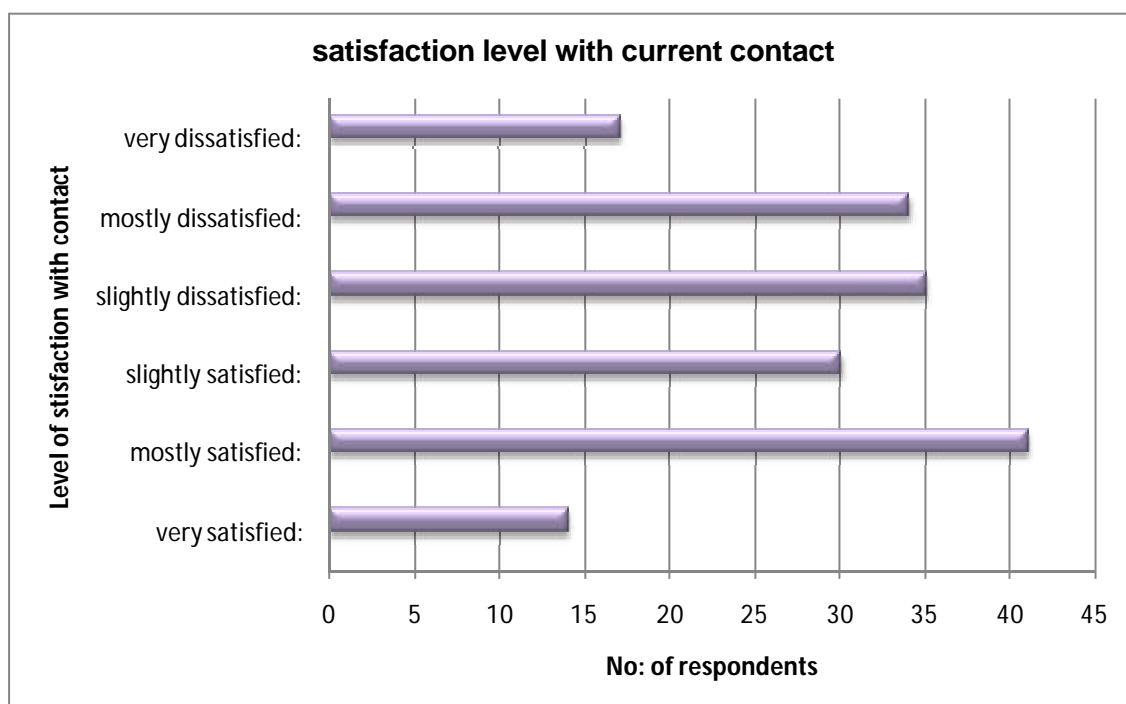


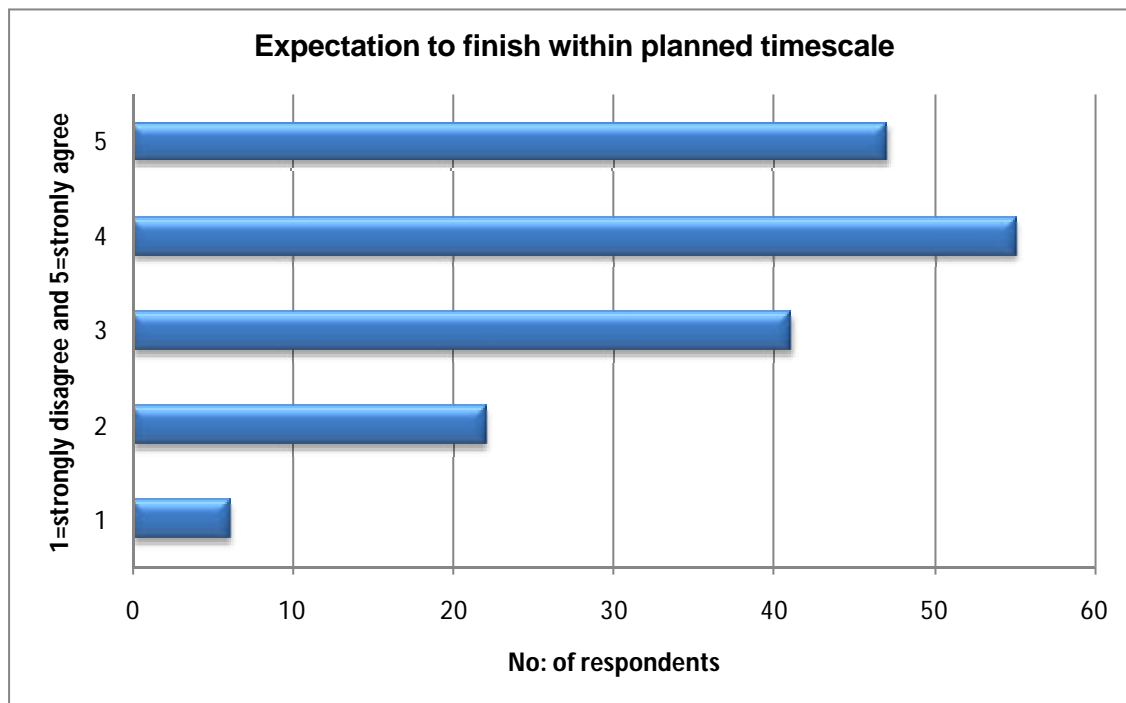
Figure 10 provides an indication of the overall level of contact that part-time PGRs have with their department/ school/ other researchers. The survey asked “How satisfied are you with the amount of contact that you have with other researchers?”

Figure 10 – satisfaction with level of contact with other researchers



One of the final questions in the survey, which is shown here in Figure 11, illustrates students' expectations for completing their research degree. The results show that most students are confident they will finish within the desired timeframe.

Figure 11 – PGRs expectations to complete within expected timescale



From the survey responses it was possible to cross tabulate some of the results with particular interest in how different responses were given against **expectation to complete**.

Figure 12 provides an indication of the relationship between contact with other researchers and feelings about the likelihood to complete their research within the desired timeframe.

As shown, the large majority of those respondents who were 'very satisfied' with the contact they have with their institution also give a response of 4 or 5 (agree/strongly agree) to the 'expectation to finish' question. The proportion in agreement declines as the level of contact declines.

It would appear that contact with other researchers plays a key role in supporting their confidence to finish their research and submit their thesis. This is supported by free text comments:

"...I am thoroughly enjoying the intellectual aspects of research, but I had thought there would be more opportunities for interactions with other researchers..."

"...contact with others keeps me motivated..."

Figure 12 – Satisfaction with contact against expectation to finish within their timeframe

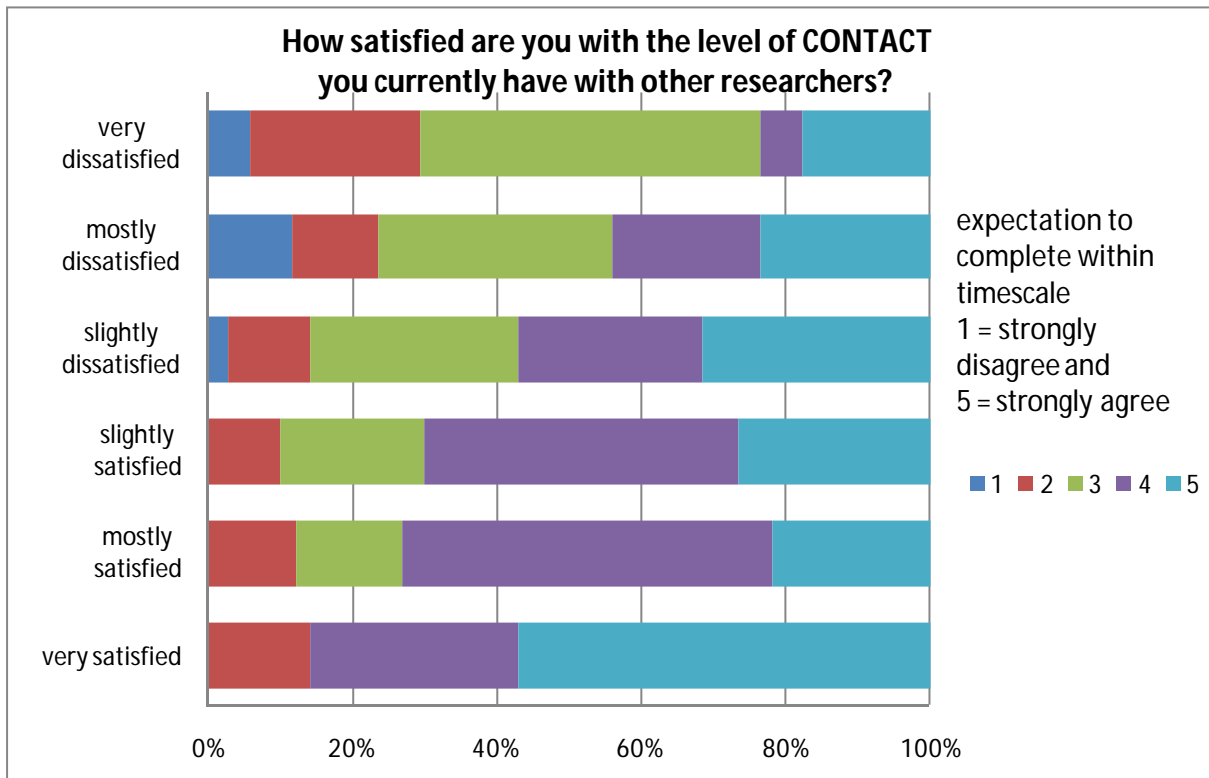


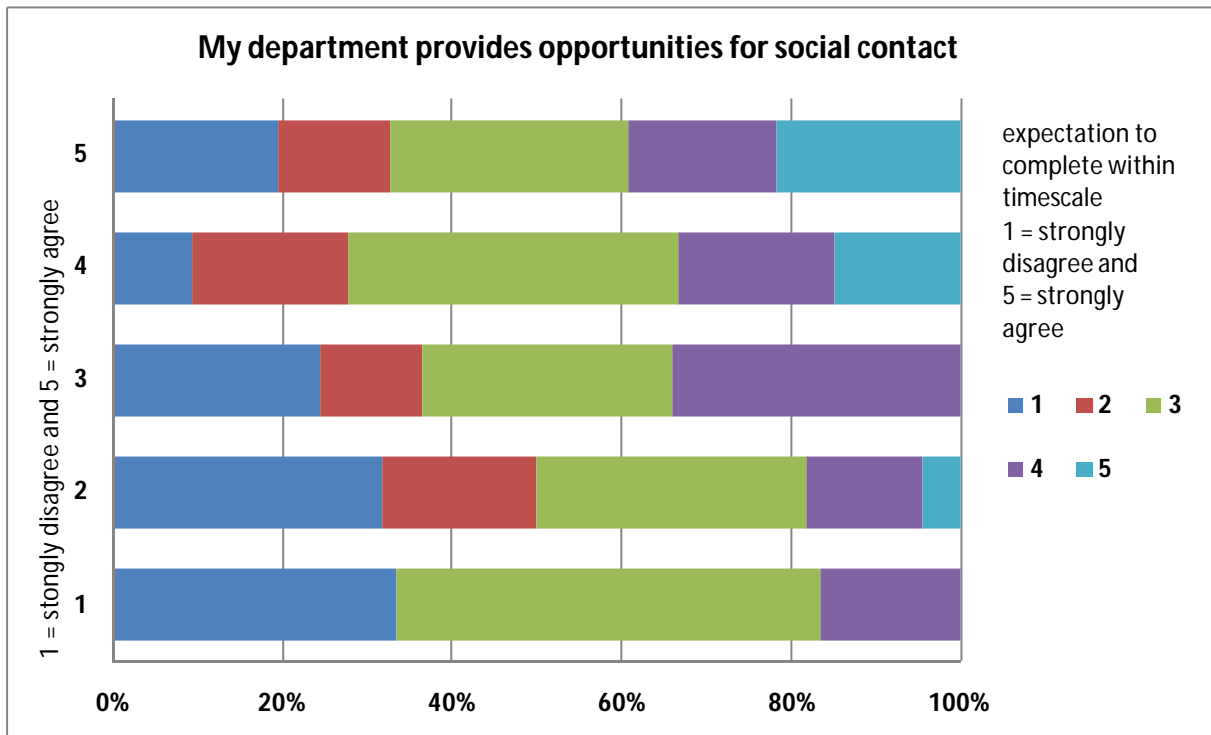
Figure 13, follows, cross tabulates the response to departmental social opportunities against expectation to finish. It can be shown that those PGRs who agree and strongly agree that their institution provides opportunities for social contact also rate their expectation to complete within the expected timescale as agree or strongly agree.

This question shows that both academic and social integration into a department is important for part-time PGRs.

“...feel I miss out on opportunities because I am not regarded in the same way or thought of as often as full-time colleagues...”

“...I feel support is available that I had not expected...”

Figure 13 – Department social opportunities against expectation to complete



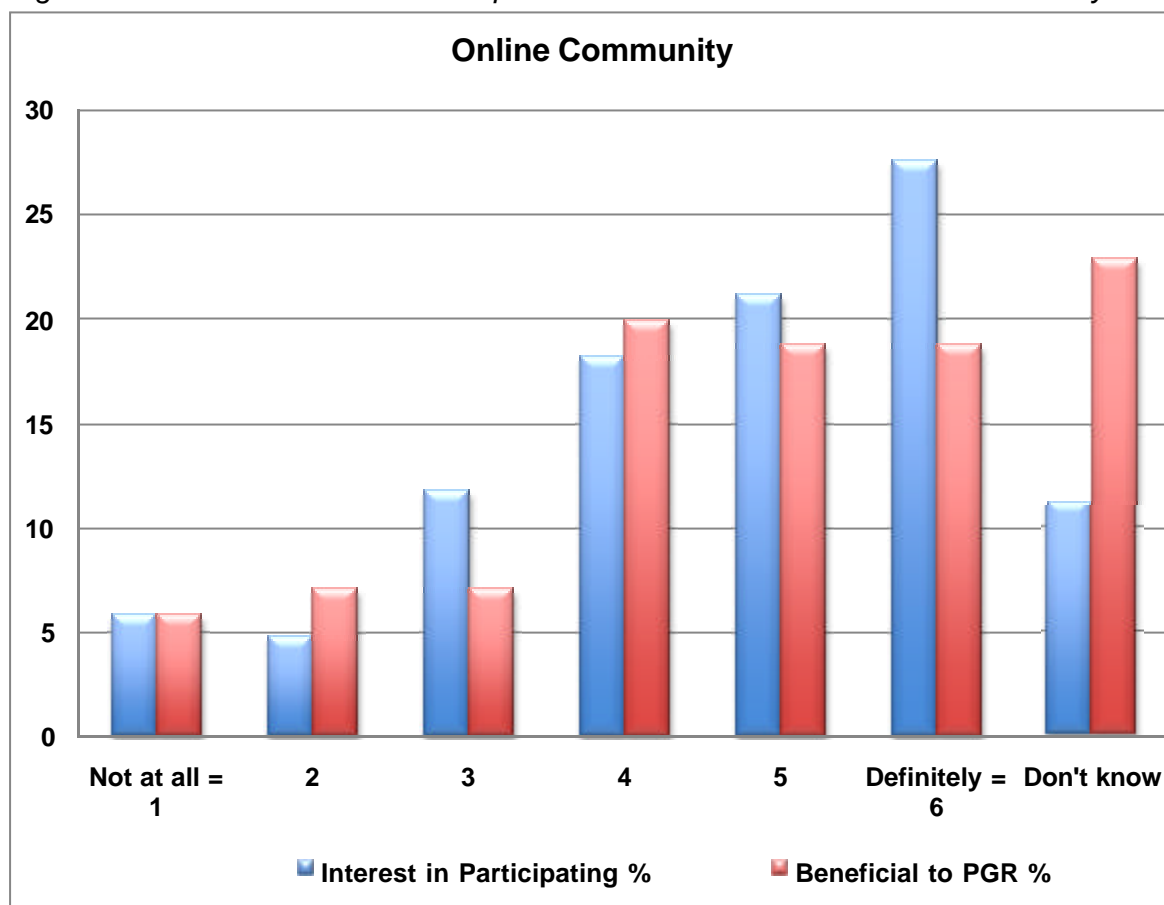
## 2.4 Online Community

In order to tackle issues of isolation, open up discussion networks and enable part-time PGRs to create relationships with other part-time PGRs in their region, the Vitae SWW Hub survey asked some questions regarding part-time PGRs interest in being involved in an online community.

Figure 14 shows levels of interest and whether respondents think they would benefit from an online community. These data show that the levels of interest and benefit levels from 4-6 substantially outweigh the 'not interested' and 'not beneficial' levels of 1-3.

Based on these results, it is the intention of the Vitae SWW Hub to provide an online community moderated and managed by the part-time PGR population in the region. There are a number of different options for this community that are currently being explored by the Vitae SWW Hub, these include Wordpress, forum software and Ning.

Figure 14 – level of interest and perceived benefit of an online community



## 2.5 The researcher experience vs. expectations

The final section of the survey focussed on the PGR individual experience of doing a part-time doctorate or MPhil, how their experience had met with their expectations.

The survey revealed that approximately 55% of respondents were neutral about their experience or that it had slightly exceeded expectations. 27% reported that their experience was worse than they had expected with 7% of those stating that it had been far worse than expected. However, this is countered by the 18% who stated that their experience had exceeded their expectations.

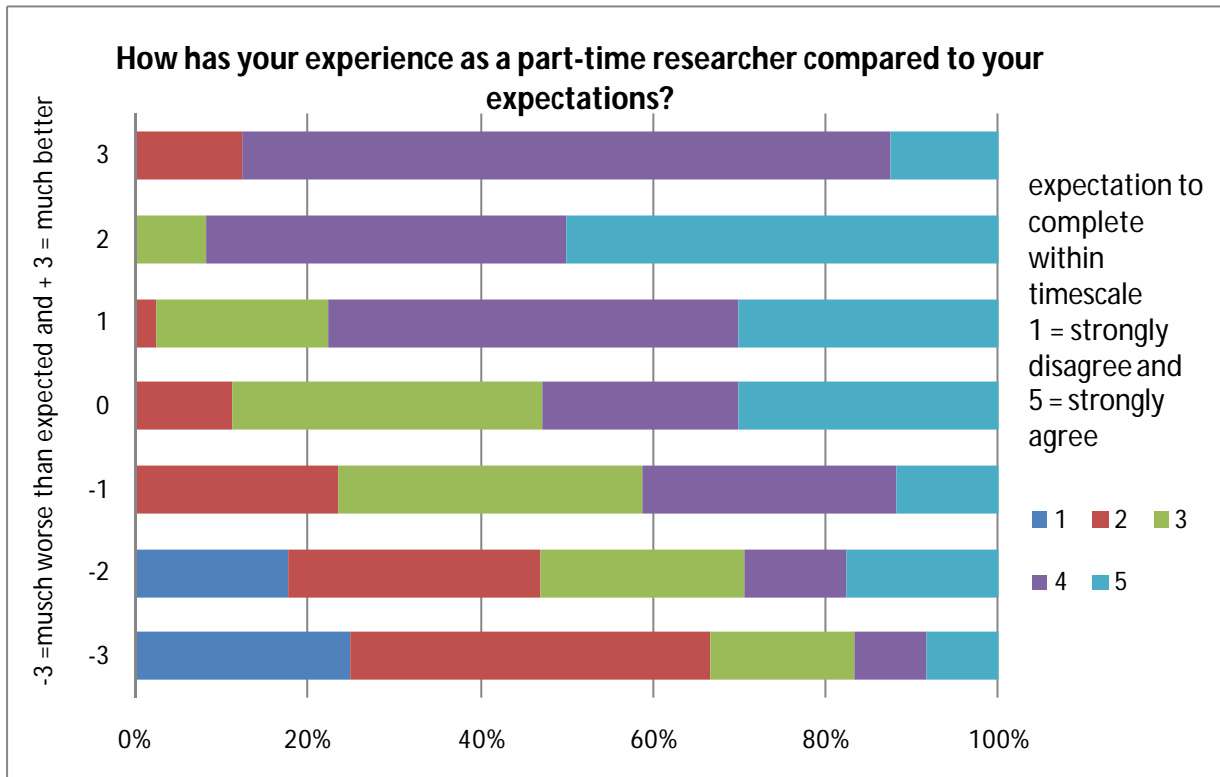
Even with these differing levels of expectation, as noted above (figure 13) more than 80% of respondents reported that they expected to finish their degree within the designated timeframe.

“...it has been a little easier in terms of being academically able to achieve – it’s been a nightmare time wise...”

“...it has taken me longer than expected. It is hard to keep momentum when part-time as other things get in the way and you lose focus and forget...”

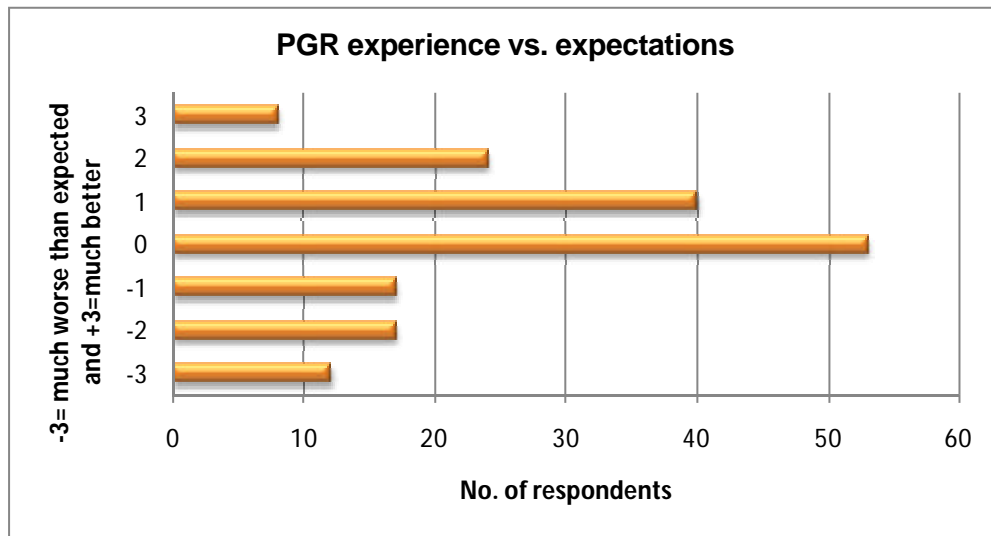
Respondents' perception of their experience compared to expectation seems to be positively correlated with their expectation of completing on time, see Figure 15.

Figure 15 – shows part-time PGRs experiences against expectation to complete



Finally the survey asked about PGR's experiences and how they had compared to their expectations. Figure 16 provides the responses to the question "How has your experience as part-time researcher compared to your expectations?" with -3 being much worse than expected and +3 being much better than expected.

Figure 16 – experience vs. expectations



The majority of PGRs gave a neutral response to this question (experience = expectations) and the numbers at the extremes of much worse and much better were about the same. However, the cumulative number of PGRs giving responses of 1, 2 and 3 is greater than those giving -1, -2 and -3 showing that overall, experiences have exceeded expectations.

## 2.6 Other Comments

Finally the Vitae SWW Hub survey asked part-time PGRs if they had any other comments about their experience that could help plan the support available; an example of the responses is given below.

“...appointing a buddy system...”

“...it’s not so much the geographical isolation, though that is a factor, it is being part-time and mostly self funded, I can’t even afford printer ink...”

“...I do not think that universities fully understand what a part-time researcher is. I believe there is still a lot of work from the departments in order to integrate part-time students...”

“...I think links with other institutions who may have students working in my area would be a positive thing...”

“...I would like a more detailed structure of guidelines...”

“...regular social meetings...”

“...why restrict networking opportunities to only part-time researchers? Surely including full-time and post doc researchers as well would make sense...”

## 3. Actions

A number of actions are currently being undertaken by the Vitae South West and Wales Hub, these include:

- The development of an online community to create an environment that enables and supports part-time researchers through their research studies.
- A series of skill based training in the four high population clusters identified in Figure 5.
- A feedback questionnaire asking part-time PGRs if they have benefited from the activities of this project.
- The production of an interim report and a final report that includes a review of activities and a reflection on the project.

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