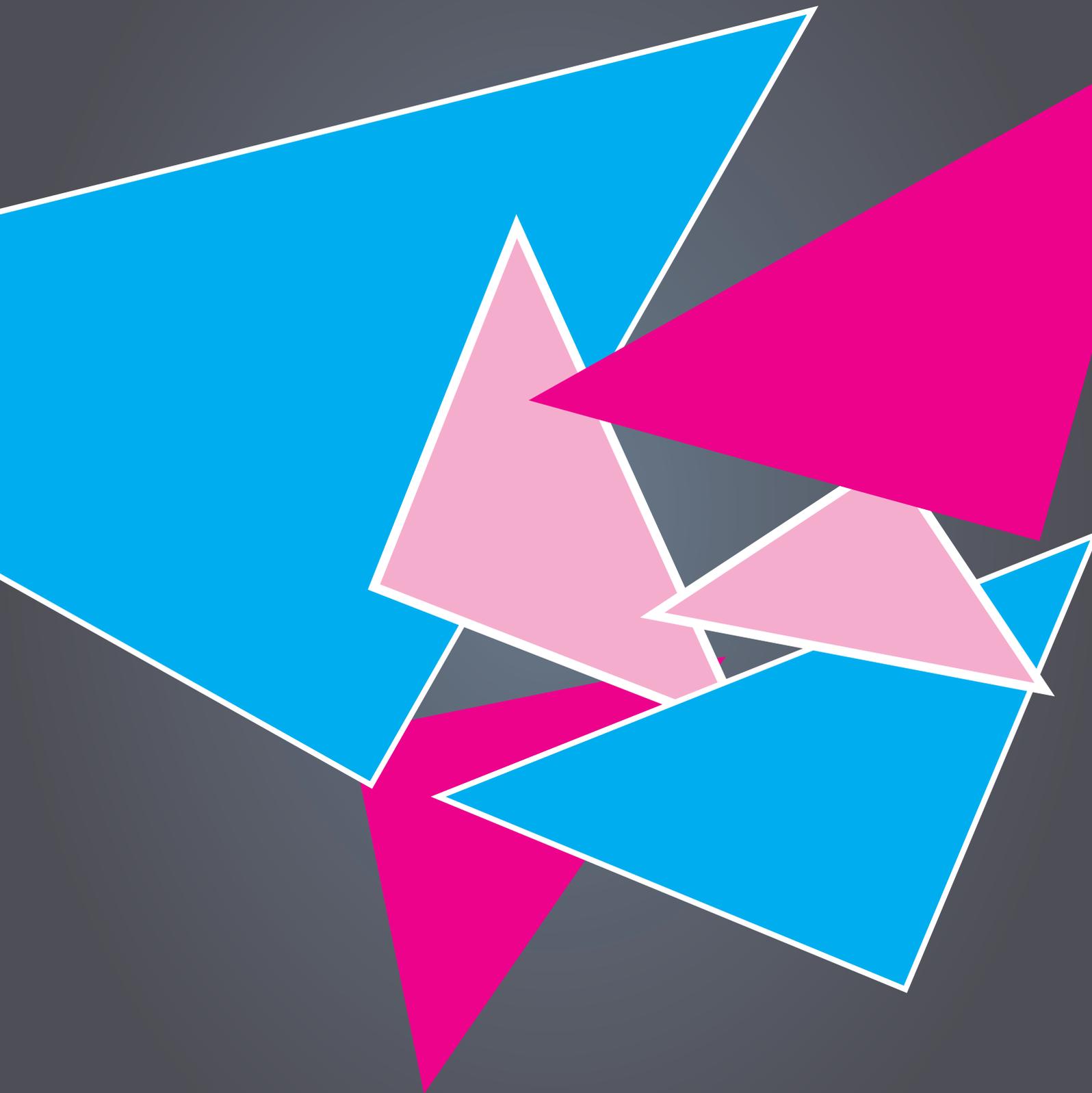


PRES Response

2017



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imperialcollegeunion.org/responses



All information correct
at the time of going to
print October 2017

Introduction



Nicholas Burstow

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Imperial College Union is proud to present our Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES) response, as part of our ongoing collaboration with College to improve the educational experience of our members.

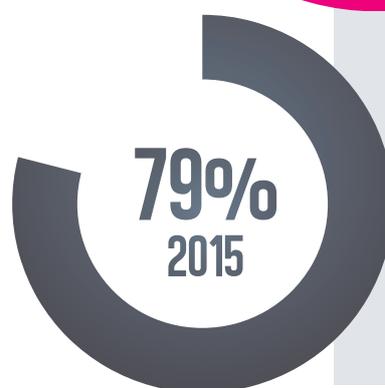
The PRES is a biennial survey completed by all postgraduate research students nationwide. Alongside its counterpart, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), and undergraduate equivalent, the National Student Survey (NSS), the PRES offers an insight into the experiences of postgraduate research students studying at Imperial.

Our response enables us to represent our members' views at all levels of College, ensuring that student feedback plays a key role in shaping important changes to the educational experience of our members.

With improvements in satisfaction across all sections since 2015, it is reassuring to see that College is making efforts to improve the experience of its research students. However, certain aspects of our members' experience still fall below what is reported at other higher educational institutions, both sector and Russell Group-wide. Continued collaboration between the Union, College, the Graduate School, and the Graduate Students' Union will ensure that we continue to evolve our educational provisions for the better.

I would like to thank Nayab Cheema, Fran Hyatt, Luke McCrone and Alex Chippy Compton for their help in writing this response. I would also like to thank those who responded to the PRES. Their feedback plays a key role in shaping changes to education, ultimately helping to improve the experience of current and future students. I wish them well for the future.

We look forward to working with College to implement these recommendations, ensuring that we continue to improve the experience of all postgraduate research students here at Imperial.



82%
Sector
Average

82%
Russell Group
Average



Luke McCrone

Graduate Students' Union President
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The Graduate Students' Union (GSU) has relished the opportunity to work with Imperial College Union in producing this response. The GSU elects a committee of postgraduate students who are able to offer unique perspectives on the recommendations within this document. We look forward to working with College and the Union in implementing these recommendations as part of our continued efforts to improve the postgraduate research experience.

Supervision

The Supervision section aims to assess whether supervisors possess suitable skills and knowledge to support and direct their students' research. This section also aims to determine whether there is adequate contact between supervisor and student.

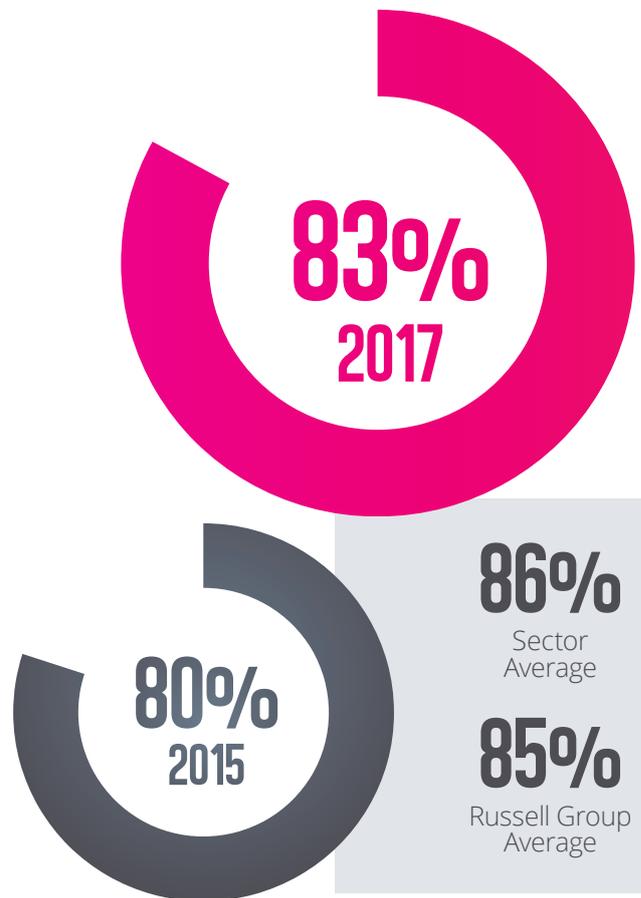
Overall satisfaction with supervision standards at Imperial has increased from 2015, but is still lower than both sector and Russell Group averages. College has recognised the need for continued improvement in this area through the creation of the *Task and Finish Group for the Student Supervisor Partnership*.

The recommendations in this section aim to complement work of the *Task and Finish Group for the Student Supervisor Partnership*. This will ensure that all students receive supervision that enables them to fulfil their potential.

Recommendations

The relationship between supervisor and student is one of the defining features of postgraduate education. Supervisors should encourage, challenge and support their students, both academically and pastorally. A positive supervisor-student relationship benefits both parties, and increases the likelihood of a successful project outcome.

Despite the importance of this relationship, students' experiences vary widely. Supervisors who give students the freedom to explore and learn from their mistakes, while ensuring that they stay on track to complete their research, are viewed favourably. However, supervisors with poor interpersonal skills, who are felt to micromanage students, can be detrimental to the student experience, and may even negatively impact project outcomes.



College has recognised the importance of this dynamic, and has created the *Task and Finish Group for the Student Supervisor Partnership*, which plans to develop policy on Research Degree Supervision. By working with students to develop this policy, College will ensure that supervisor expectations are clearly defined, which will benefit both students and staff.

Recommendation

College should continue to engage students in developing its policy on *Research Degree Supervision*, ensuring that all students receive supervision that enables them to fulfil their potential.



"My supervisor gives me the freedom and responsibility to allow me to further my own research interests whilst keeping me on top of what I need to do for my PhD."

Department of Medicine



"Supervision needs to be taken more seriously. Many researchers don't like the idea of being a people manager, but once you're supervising students or leading a group, you're doing exactly that. Training should be provided for people in those positions. The needs of students and post-doctoral researchers both in terms of their research career and in terms of employee welfare need to be taken more seriously."

Department of Physics

Regular meetings between supervisors and students facilitate academic progress, helping to identify and address mistakes before they may impact on results. In addition, regular contact is important for wellbeing, helping to identify any pastoral issues affecting the student.

Unfortunately, many students report that they do not have regular meetings with their supervisor. Furthermore, some supervisors do not respond to emails, leaving students isolated and unsure of how to proceed. Supervisors are not currently required to produce 'progress reports' for their students. This is particularly frustrating for students with infrequent supervisor contact, as it leaves them with little idea of how to develop.

One of the outputs of the *Task and Finish Group for the Student Supervisor Partnership* is the *Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership* document. This outlines how supervisors should support their students, including the importance of regular meetings. However, more needs to be done to ensure that students are receiving sufficient guidance, and that email queries are responded to. While a biannual progress report will provide students with the guidance they desire, stipulating a time frame in which emails should be answered, as is recommended for personal tutors by the *Personal Tutors Working Group*, will help to address the issues of unanswered student queries.

Recommendation

At the start of the programme, supervisors and students should agree upon mutual expectations, including weekly meetings, as per the *Mutual Expectations for the Research Degree Student Supervisor Partnership* document. Alongside this, supervisors should answer work-related emails within 5 working days, and produce a biannual student progress report, ensuring students are adequately guided and supported.



"I have great supervision with both formal meetings scheduled regularly and a very constructive open door policy to pop in and ask questions."

Department of Earth Science and Engineering



"I have little regular contact with my supervisor and most of the time I was left alone to deal with my research and how to develop it. I understand learning to work alone is part of the process (and a useful skill), but a bit more guidance would have been appreciated. It would have help me to progress faster."

Department of Chemical Engineering

Resources

The Resources section aims to assess whether students feel they are provided with adequate learning resources to fulfil their potential as researchers. It covers working spaces, computing and library facilities, and any special resources required.

This is a section where Imperial has traditionally excelled, and this year is no different, with scores well above both sector and Russell Group averages.

The recommendations in this section set out how Imperial can continue to lead the way in resource provision for all postgraduate research students.

Recommendations

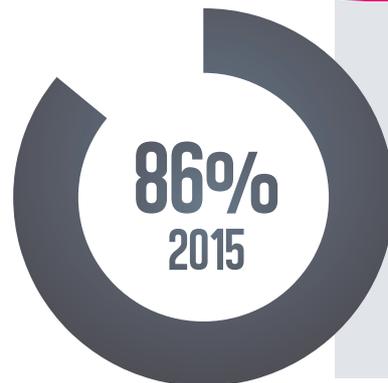
With students spending a significant portion of their days at desks and in labs, adequate space provision and utilisation is vital in order to maximise productivity. Given its importance, it is unsurprising that many students identify space as an area needing improvement.

Students report a lack of space for: storage, group-work, work-related conference calls, and social interaction. Through the creation of the *Task and Finish Group for Research Culture and Community*, College has demonstrated its desire to tackle the issue of postgraduate space provision.

The support for a "Postgraduate Hub" by the *Task and Finish Group for Research Culture and Community* aims to address many of the areas of concern raised by students regarding space. Close collaboration between College and postgraduate students is vital to ensure that both needs of students and staff are met.

Recommendation

College should ensure that the *Task and Finish Group for Research Culture and Community* identifies and addresses issues with space provision, particularly: storage, group-work, conference calls, and social interaction.



81%
Sector
Average

83%
Russell Group
Average



"All the resources are easily accessible and there is a lot of support in this area. My working space is highly comfortable."

Department of Bioengineering



"Students have very little space to work in peace and think. There is a severe lack of group working space. Open plan is fundamentally flawed for having spontaneous discussion but not disturbing others. There should be dedicated pods, ancillary to open space learning areas, where we can go to discuss. Or, as is the problem in ESE, it should be a lot easier to book rooms/see available rooms."

Department of Earth Science and Engineering

Imperial is a world-leading institution, often at the cutting-edge of the latest scientific research. With ever increasing use of digital technology, advanced data analysis and complex software, it is imperative that students are able to utilise these resources.

Despite the benefits of advanced technology in research, not all students are able to take advantage of available resources, with many expressing frustration with IT software and hardware provision. Students report being unable to run essential software and are restricted by outdated and underpowered hardware.

It is vital that research students are able to make use of the latest software, with suitable hardware to facilitate this. Continued investment in IT provision will ensure that Imperial remains a global leader in scientific research and technological innovation.

Recommendation

College should invest further in its IT provision, equipping research students with the latest software and hardware to complete their research to the best of their potential.



"I have not run into any problems accessing materials that I need for my research. And my personally allocated computer does just fine for my work. Access to clusters and other HPC resources is also helpful."

Department of Mathematics



"The quality of PCs provided to PhD students is poor; often they have decent specs but are old and so noticeably slower."

Department of Physics

Research Culture

The Research Culture section aims to assess the opportunities for students to discuss and present their research, both within their department and more widely as part of a research community. This section also looks to understand how the ambience within departments and College can stimulate a healthy working environment.

Satisfaction with research culture at Imperial has increased since 2015, exceeding that of the sector and matching the Russell Group average. Following consultation with the *Working Party for World Class Supervision* and 2015 PRES results, College established a *Task and Finish Group for Research Culture and Community* to address the research culture at Imperial.

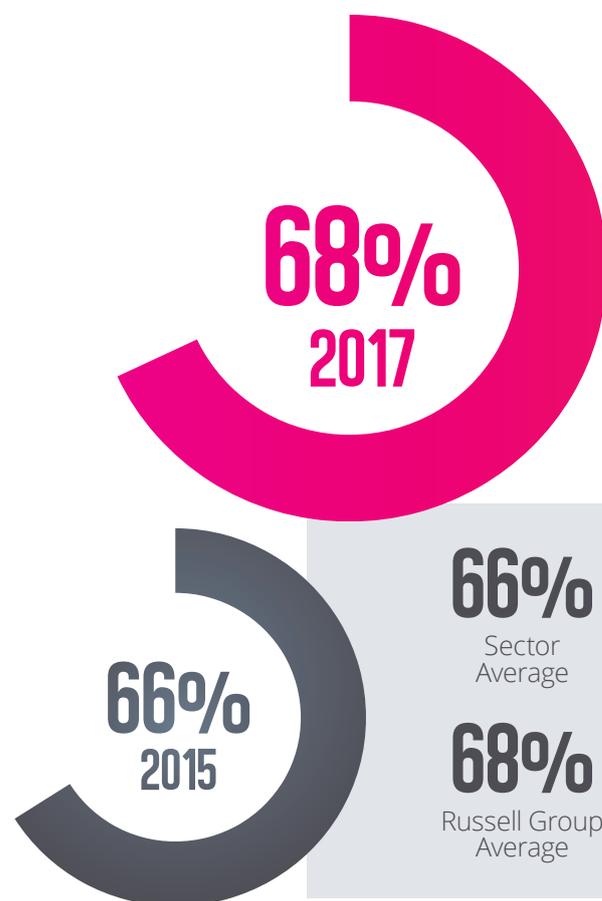
The recommendations put forward here look to build on those identified by the *Task and Finish Group for Research Culture and Community*, with the aim of instilling a culture that encourages collaboration and shared learning.

Recommendations

Research seminars enable students to deepen their understanding, engage in critical thinking, and encourages them to reflect on concepts beyond their specialism. Seminars also provide a space where healthy debate can take place.

Students highlighted that, although seminars do take place, they are often infrequent and initiated by students rather than by their departments. Seminar attendance is often restricted to those who believe the topic has a direct impact on their area of research.

Departments should take responsibility for organising regular seminars, ensuring that a full range of subject matter is covered. Delivering a broad programme of seminars and communicating these widely to students will increase engagement, in turn promoting discussion and collaboration.



"Our group invites international visitors (academics and PhD students) regularly which is great for networking and finding out more beyond work done at Imperial."

Department of Physics



"Very little collaboration and co-operation within different departments and even within the same department. Co-operation is not encouraged, seems that faculty of the same department are in competition to one another, which blocks any cooperation. This is unfortunate. I feel like a lot of pressure is put on students, staff, faculty to publish/present."

Department of Chemical Engineering

Recommendation

Departments should host regular seminars and continue to publicise these through the Graduate School's College-wide Open Research Seminar Listings website and the Graduate Students' Union. Alongside this, the Graduate School and Graduate Students' Union should promote College-wide events that cover a broad range of topics.

Imperial is an institution that prides itself on striving for educational excellence alongside cultivating world-class research.

Communication, collaboration and co-operation are essential to fostering a positive research culture. Unfortunately, students report a lack of these cultural traits here at Imperial. The *Institutional Culture Review* found that research culture at Imperial holds 'excellence' at its core, with a word cloud showing 'competitiveness' as one of the most cited words. Although competition and excellence may drive up standards, they can also be detrimental to nurturing a healthy research culture.

It is imperative that departments create a safe space for students to come together to discuss their research. While the cohort building initiatives offered by the Graduate School aim to bring students together and foster positive interactions, more needs to be done to build a community that is centred around collaboration and communication between both students and staff.

Recommendation

Departments should facilitate opportunities for students to communicate and collaborate, fostering a positive and healthy research environment. Alongside this, the Graduate School and Graduate Students' Union should signpost and promote cohort building initiatives.



"The job that the PhD reps are doing is very helpful in this regard. The presentation seminar they organise is really good way to get to know about other students work and is a conducive environment to network with others."

Department of Aeronautics



"The best word that would sum up the research culture at this department for me would be 'disconnected'. Supervisors seem disconnected from their students and even other students and staff are mostly keeping to themselves. It certainly didn't feel as the most welcoming environment when I started."

Department of Surgery and Cancer

Progress & Assessment

The Progress and Assessment section aims to determine how students found the organisation of their postgraduate degree. Specifically, it gauges students' opinions on: induction, progress monitoring and final assessment, including whether they understand the required thesis standard.

Satisfaction with progress and assessment has increased since 2015, scoring higher than the Russell Group average and matching the sector average.

Effective course organisation plays a key role in student satisfaction. A robust course induction, alongside transparent and well-communicated course requirements, can significantly enhance the student experience.

The recommendations in this section aim to improve existing provisions at Imperial, ensuring that every student is aware of what is expected of them, and how they can achieve these expectations.

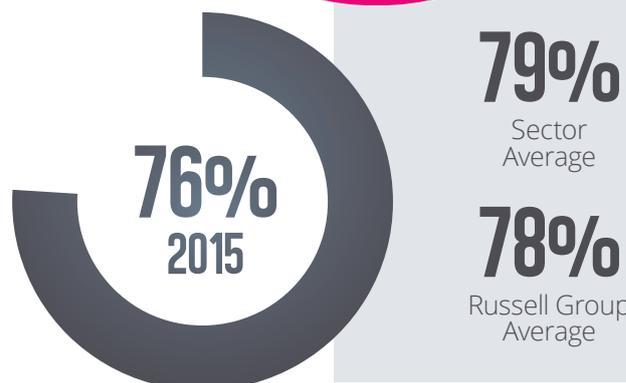
Recommendations

Starting a new programme can be daunting, even for postgraduate students with prior experience of higher education. An effective induction aims to make the transition into postgraduate research as smooth as possible.

Imperial currently runs a postgraduate induction during October, coinciding with the start of term for undergraduates. However, relatively few postgraduate research students can benefit from this, as programme start dates often fall outside this period. In addition, many students who were able to attend an induction report a lack of clarity regarding assessment milestones, with particular frustration at a lack of thesis-related information.

Induction periods are not only important for academic support, but also for student wellbeing. In giving the chance for incoming students to meet one another, programme inductions facilitate cohort building and promote social cohesion.

It is vital that College continues to improve its postgraduate induction provisions, both in terms of content and timeliness. This will provide all new students with an equally effective induction, ensuring their transition to Imperial is as smooth possible.



Recommendation

Departments should continue to work alongside the Graduate School and Graduate Students' Union to run multiple induction sessions per year, including social activities to facilitate cohort building.



"Induction was really good. Allowed us to form good friendships within our year group."

Institute of Clinical Science



"I started in the summer so had no formal induction process as it was outside term time, making the registration process quite unguided. I am not confident on how the thesis and final examinations will look but sure I can ask when the time is right."

School of Public Health

The write-up phase of a research programme can be stressful at the best of times. It is important that students know what is expected of their assessed work, both in terms of structure and content, so that they can plan their activities effectively.

Unfortunately, many students report a lack of clarity around what is expected of their assessed work, be it Early Stage Assessments, Late Stage Reviews or thesis. Lack of templates and formatting guidance is a common source of frustration, particularly when preparing a thesis. Finally, students report difficulty in accessing submission guidance online, with lack of a clear, easy-to-navigate website containing all of the necessary advice.

By providing students with easily accessible, comprehensive guidance on what is expected for all assessed work, College will ensure that its postgraduate students are able to focus their attention on what really matters in their assessments: content. Model examples will help in this cause, demonstrating what students should be aiming for, both in terms of structure and content.

Recommendation

Departments should provide clear, easily accessible instructions and expectations for all assessed work. In particular, students should receive detailed guidance on what is expected from their thesis. Where possible, model examples should be provided.



"I am consulting with staff members several times per year to ensure I can comply with all the rules. The guidelines are all available online and the staff members are very helpful and provide everything I need to know."

Department of Bioengineering



"There is no clear template for the Early Stage Assessment, Late Stage Review or final Thesis, so I am a little unclear on what is exactly required."

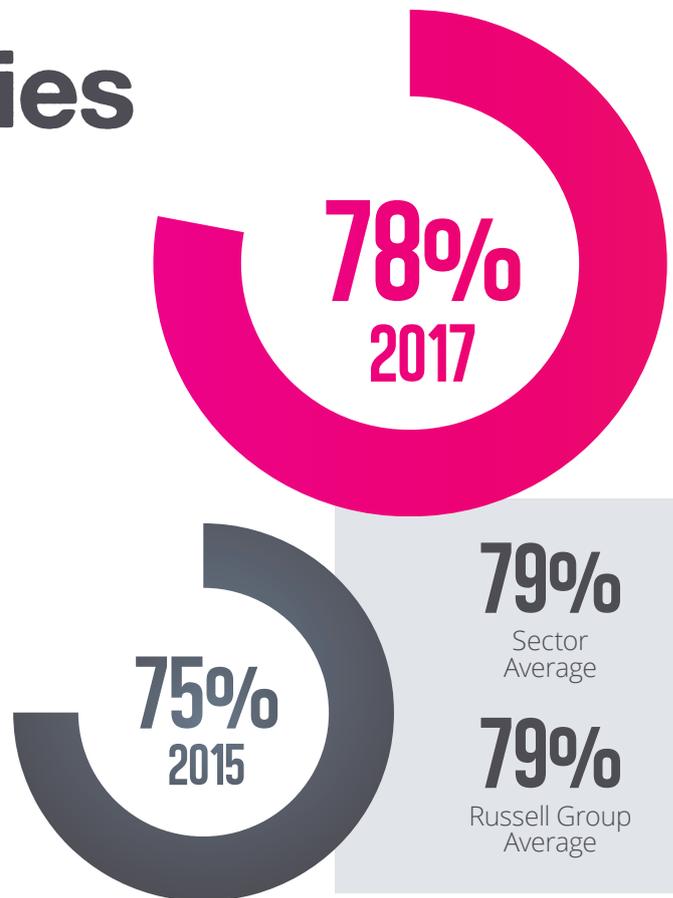
Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering

Responsibilities

The Responsibilities section asks students to reflect both on their responsibilities as students, and their supervisor's responsibilities towards them. Alongside this, questions within this section seek to gauge students' opinions of the perceived value of their feedback.

This year, Imperial improved on its 2015 score, but scored below both sector and Russell Group averages.

Student comments in the section expressed a clear frustration from those who felt that their feedback was not valued by their departments. The recommendations in this section aim to encourage departments to actively engage with student feedback, ensuring that students feel their opinions are not just heard but listened to.



Recommendations

Student feedback plays an important role in developing educational and research excellence at Imperial. Not only does this feedback facilitate improvement year on year, but if students see that their feedback is being listened to and acted upon, they will be more likely to engage with College to shape education for the better.

Reflected in both this year's NSS and PRES results was a frustration among students who felt that their feedback was being ignored. Consistent with the recommendation put forward in this year's NSS response, we ask that departments close the feedback loop, ensuring that students are aware of the changes that have (or have not been made) following their feedback.

Recommendation

Departments should ensure they close the feedback loop, informing students of steps taken (or not) following their feedback.



"I have noticed several occasions where undergraduate and postgraduate feedback has been noted and discussed in depth. This has led to a large array of improvements to the faculty which have led directly from student feedback. This is a great positive feedback loop and I feel my voice is heard."

Department of Mechanical Engineering



"I have found ICL [Imperial College London] as an organisation extremely uninterested in the opinions of students. It has been made extremely clear to me and my peers on a number of occasions that student opinion is both unimportant and unwelcome."

Department of Life Sciences

Power dynamics can play a significant role in the supervisor-student relationship, often leaving students fearful of providing constructive feedback about their supervision, in case their work suffers as a result.

In recent years, the Graduate School have taken steps to address this issue in their *Supervisor's Guidebook*, where they outline the impact that such a relationship can have on the wellbeing of doctoral students.

Departments should cultivate positive working relationships between staff and students whereby students are comfortable with offering feedback to their supervisors and likewise, supervisors are open to receiving constructive feedback.

Recommendation

Departments should establish feedback mechanisms that enable students to raise concerns regarding their supervision without fearing any repercussions.



"There are several feedback mechanisms in place. I promote that those mechanisms are made aware to everyone on a regular basis. If there are uncertainties, staff will always happily help out."

Department of Bioengineering



"Within my specific course, a CDT [Centre for Doctoral Training], the support staff and supervisors interchange and are all quite good friends. This often results in a conflict of interest and leads to many students feeling uncomfortable about making comments to a member of staff if they have trouble with their supervisor."

Department of Chemistry

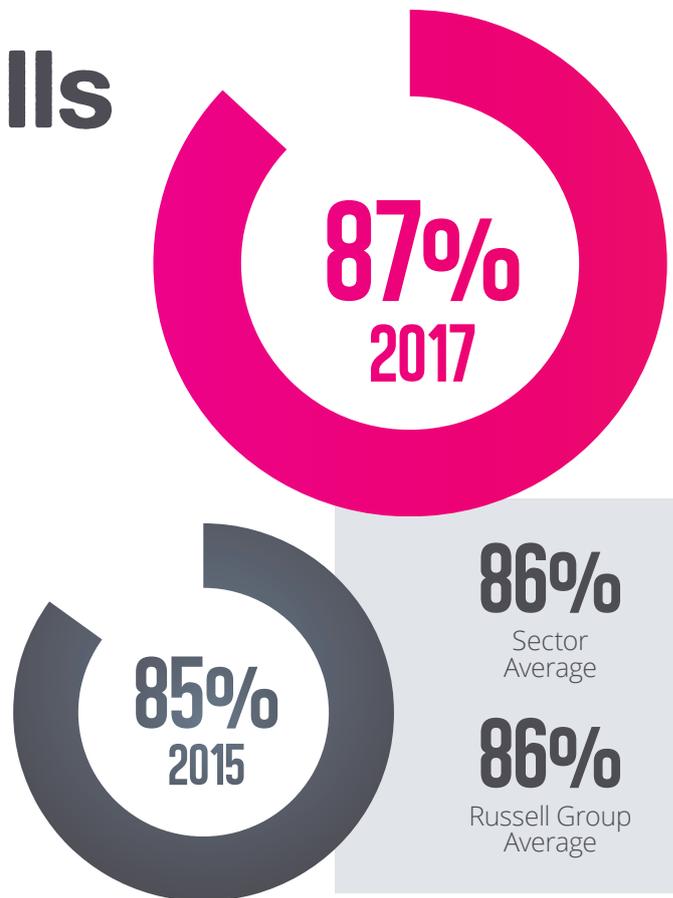


Research Skills

The research skills section covers all areas of students' skill development throughout their time at Imperial. Students are asked to reflect on the development of particular skills, including: appropriate research methodologies, critical analysis and evaluation, creativity, innovation, and research ethics and integrity.

Imperial's score in this section has improved since 2015, placing College above both sector and Russell Group averages. While this is encouraging to see, there are still areas of improvement to be made, particularly in developing a common understanding of research integrity among students. Alongside this, students felt that their research skills had not developed as much as they would have liked throughout their programme.

The recommendations put forward here seek to enhance existing opportunities for skills development.



Recommendations

Imperial prides itself on being home to cutting-edge innovation and excellence in research. Students come to Imperial with the hope of learning creative and innovative research methods that will enable them to go on to make a positive difference to society.

However, many students report that a drive for publishable results often comes at the detriment of creativity within their research. While published material is a tangible outcome of research, the value of creative and innovative research methodology cannot be overstated. Research supervision at Imperial should encourage the development of these skills in its students.

Recommendation 1

Supervisors should actively encourage students to be creative and innovative in their research, supporting them to develop these skills throughout the supervision process.



"I arrived at the start of the PhD programme thinking I have developed quite a lot of my skills after previously completing a graduate scheme at Rolls-Royce, but I have found my skills have improved significantly more than I thought. This is down to excellent supervision and high quality development activities (such as the Imperial Residential etc)."

Department of Mechanical Engineering



"Creativity and innovation is hindered when the supervisor is more interested about the number of papers produced rather than the professional growth of the student. The research environment at Imperial College does not show much rigour, ethics, transparency, attributing the contribution of others."

Department of Chemical Engineering

An effective postgraduate research programme should instil more than academic knowledge relevant to the area of study, but also transferable personal and professional skills. The Graduate School offers an award-winning postgraduate professional skills development programme for postgraduate students that encompasses a wide range of courses and training opportunities.

While these courses cover the development of certain skills like writing and presenting, students report a desire for increased emphasis on specific areas such as coding and lab skills.

Students should be made aware of these opportunities, and encouraged by their supervisors and departments to enroll on these courses.

Recommendation

Departments should work with the Graduate School to promote and encourage enrolment to short courses for postgraduate research students covering specific topics such as: ethics, coding, lab skills and statistics.



"Imperial is the best place to grow and develop as a researcher."

Department of Computing



"It has definitely developed but I think the institution should provide us with courses on statistics and ethics- especially for international students like myself who are not familiar with the ethical procedures in this country."

Department of Surgery and Cancer

Professional Development

The Professional Development section aims to assess the opportunities available for students to develop a professional network, and communicate with diverse audiences. Students are asked to consider their progress in terms of project management and how they have approached managing their professional development.

This section saw an increase in satisfaction from 2015, matching both sector and Russell Group averages. However, comments within this section reported a strong 'publish or perish' mentality, with professional skill development often overlooked.

The recommendations in this section look to extend the support offered to postgraduate research students and create opportunities for them to develop professional skills beyond the scope of their degree.

Recommendations

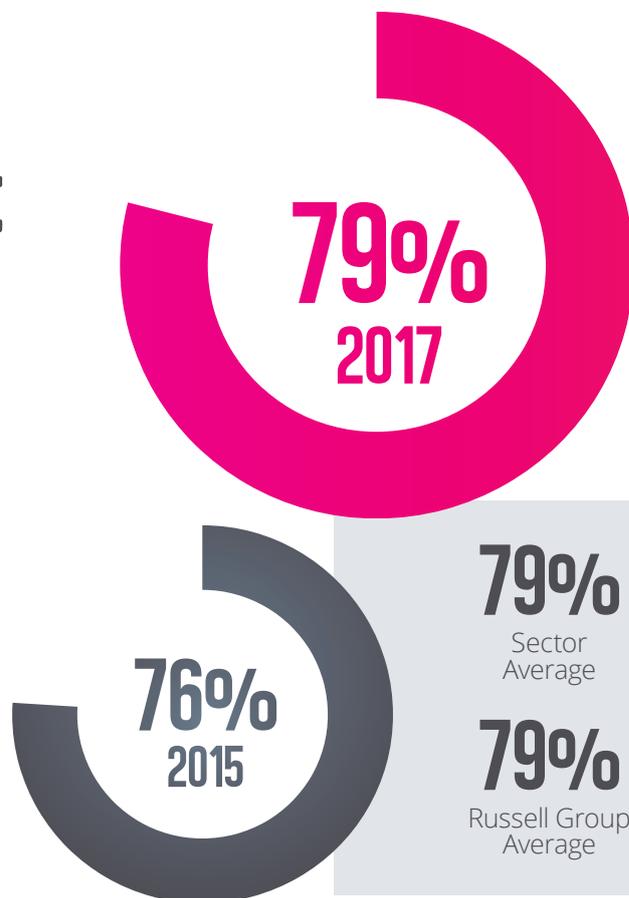
Learning how to write up a piece of academic research for a thesis or publication is an important skill that postgraduate research students learn. However it is just as important that students are able to communicate their findings to a lay audience.

Imperial hosts a range of outreach initiatives that enable students to present their research to non-academic audiences through events such as *Imperial Festival*, and to the Imperial community at the *Graduate School's Annual PhD Summer Showcase*.

Supervisors and departments should support students in considering how they can use creative and innovative methods to communicate their research findings to a wide range of audiences. Presenting at outreach and College events will not only enhance communication skills but empower students to take ownership over their personal and professional development.

Recommendation

Students should be given opportunities to communicate their research creatively to different audiences, utilising existing schemes like *Imperial Festival* and the *Graduate School Annual PhD Summer Showcase*.



"Things like demonstrating, giving presentations and doing outreach and teaching have helped a lot. I am glad that I took advantage of opportunities to do these things, not everyone does. I think perhaps there should be more opportunities for presenting in informal settings."

Department of Materials



"A problem with the question regarding developing contacts is that there appears to be little support for people who struggle to network in the first place! The majority of these events are suitable for outgoing people. Anyone who suffers from any mental health issues, such as depression, anxiety disorders or social disorders, is not going to feel helped by the Careers Service and will therefore struggle with networking. This is something which needs to be addressed urgently. It's all well and good holding events which proclaim that mental health is an issue being tackled by the College, but actually, raising awareness is pointless if very little is done about thereafter."

Department of Mechanical Engineering

Understanding and reflecting on one's professional development is key to career progression. Awareness of one's own abilities can help to identify skills to be developed and improved.

It is recognised that self-reflection is a skill highly valued by graduate employers. Supervisors and personal tutors can play a crucial role in providing perspective and helping students identify their strengths and areas for improvement. However, given the results-driven environment in academia, it is recognised that both staff and students do not dedicate enough time to reflect and engage in personal development opportunities.

A new initiative, the *Imperial Award*, aims to facilitate self-reflection among students. By building on existing conversations between students and personal tutors or supervisors, the *Imperial Award* provides a framework for discussion that enables students to reflect on the skills they have developed through both academic and non-academic experiences. Already piloted on undergraduate students, the *Imperial Award* is due to be launched to all undergraduate students in January 2018.

By extending the *Imperial Award* to postgraduate students, College will promote positive, developmentally-focused interactions, where students can receive guidance and encouragement to further their personal development.

Recommendation

Following a successful launch to undergraduates, College should extend the *Imperial Award* programme to postgraduate research students, thereby encouraging reflection of personal development.



"I have found certain grad school courses immensely helpful and I think that they should be encouraged more beyond the first year. In addition, certain Centres for Doctoral Training are required to take internal courses on research ethics and philosophy of science that I think is very valuable and would be beneficial for everyone to take."

Department of Materials



"Firstly, my project management ability has improved somewhat in that I am the only person working on my project, and so I have to manage every aspect of it and take full ownership. On the flip side, I do not feel like my supervisor manages my approach at all, which results in the whole process taking far longer than I believe it should do. Having better guidance in how to time different aspect of projects would be helpful. Secondly, finding time to invest in professional development is extremely difficult. Our department feels very results/publication driven, and there is therefore a constant pressure to be in the office working towards finishing something. It does not feel like there is time/mind power free to invest afternoons or days in professional development."

School of Public Health

Opportunities

This new addition to the PRES explores the opportunities available to students throughout their degree, including: creating personal development plans, training to develop research and transferrable skills, conferences, presenting or submitting papers, careers advice, internships, and communicating research to non-academic audiences. This section also looked at the opportunities students had to teach.

Being a new section, there is no previous data for comparison. However, Imperial scored higher than both sector and Russell Group averages.

The recommendations in this section take into consideration comments collated across all areas of the PRES where references are made to the opportunities available to students. With key themes emerging around a perceived lack of encouragement and awareness of provision and support, these recommendations aim to tackle how opportunities are communicated to students.

Recommendations

Attending and presenting at conferences is a key opportunity for students to develop professional skills and build a network of contacts outside Imperial.

However, the cost of travel, accommodation and conferences themselves, can be a financial barrier that prevents students benefiting from such opportunities. In addition to financial support, schedules should be accommodating to enable students to attend these conferences, helping to broaden their horizons.

It is vital that College recognises the benefits of attending and presenting at conferences, and the impact that a lack of accessible funding has on a research student's professional development. Further efforts are needed to enable research students to attend conferences and events that will not only develop professional skills but contribute to their personal development as individuals.

Recommendation

College should review and signpost existing funding provisions, enabling students to attend and present at conferences, thereby furthering their personal and professional development.



60%
Sector
Average

61%
Russell Group
Average



"Things like demonstrating, giving presentations and doing outreach and teaching have helped a lot. I am glad that I took advantage of opportunities to do these things, not everyone does. I think perhaps there should be more opportunities for presenting in informal settings."

Department of Materials



"Within the department there is little opportunity to present your work other than the yearly symposium, which offers nothing to first years, a poster to second years and a talk to third years. This falls in conference season though and so I will be missing it this year and so I could easily complete my PhD never having given an academic talk. There is far more opportunity for DTC [Centre for Doctoral Training] students to present their work both within college and at conferences."

Department of Physics

Undertaking a research programme is a significant commitment and can be the grounding for future careers. A postgraduate research degree can open doors to careers in academia or industry. It is vital that students receive sufficient career guidance to enable them to make the most of their qualifications and opportunities.

Students have access to a well-established Careers Service and a Graduate School that broadens and cultivates skills through personal development workshops. However, students report a lack of interest and support for career aspirations outside of academia and research.

It is imperative that supervisors recognise the value in whatever career path students wish to pursue following completion of their research programme. With existing professional provisions available to students, supervisors should actively encourage students to access these services.

Recommendation

Supervisors should encourage students to access career guidance, signposting services from the Careers Service and Graduate School Workshops.



"I believe that the opportunities available at Imperial College in relation to research are outstanding and provide us with a very good footing to continue a career in research."

Department of Medicine



"I would prefer more support from my supervisor in my personal training and development as a professional. In my opinion, being considered as a mere employee that always needs to deliver and perform is a mentality that suits professional jobs rather a PhD."

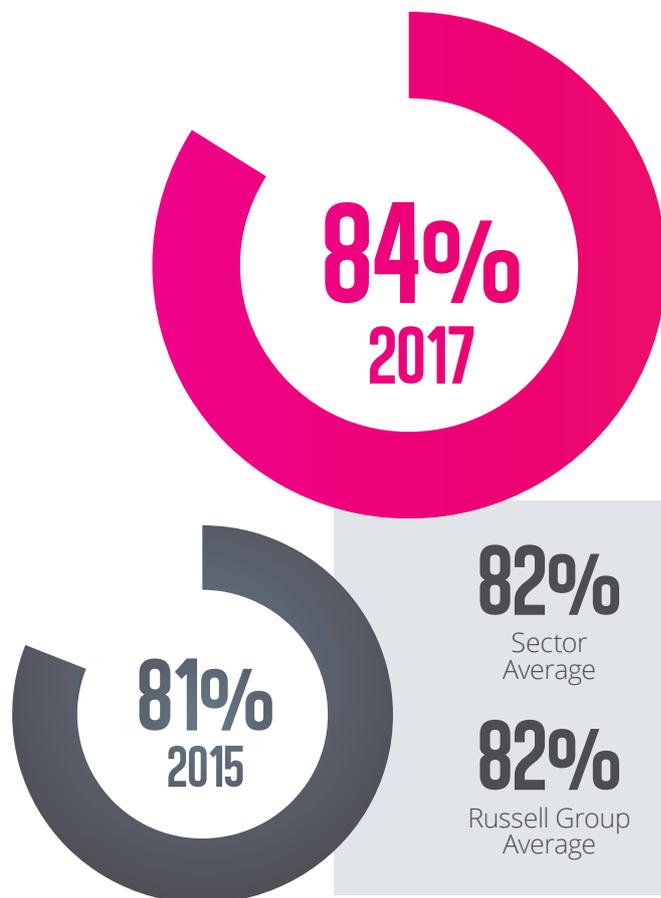
Department of Chemical Engineering

Completion

The Completion question asks students whether they anticipate completing their work within the stipulated timeframe. Completing a PhD is a huge achievement, requiring years of hard work and dedication. In order to be able to complete their programmes, students not only need to be given the opportunity to develop and grow as researchers, but also need to be appropriately supported throughout their time at Imperial.

Improving from its 2015 score in this question, Imperial also scored higher than sector and Russell Group averages. While it is encouraging to see that many Imperial students believe they will complete their programme on schedule, there are still a few areas that require addressing.

The recommendations laid out in this section aim to explore these areas further, ensuring that postgraduate students are able to complete their programmes to a high standard.



Recommendations

Students at Imperial are given the option of completing their PhDs within a three to four year timescale. However, with most funding opportunities limited to three years, some students are unable to complete their programmes due to financial difficulties.

Such circumstances place an unnecessary burden on students, negatively impacting their wellbeing. In addition, the quality of their work often suffers, which can worsen wellbeing further. This is not a rare occurrence, with many PhD programmes running over the expected timeframe. Funding provisions available to students undertaking their PhDs should reflect this and allow students to access additional funding should they need it.

Recommendation

College should review existing funding provisions for students who do not finish their programme within the expected timeframe.



"Imperial is an amazing institution for so many reasons and I feel very lucky to be part of it. I came from Economics to study math and [though it] was a difficult [change] Imperial College gave me all the support I needed. Indeed, I have done a MSc in Applied Math, an MRes and now a PhD in Math."

Department of Mathematics



"Funding ran out, I cannot afford to rent a place, so I am considering to drop out after 3.5 years or find an alternative job to pay rent. There was no support, no warning. I would not recommend it."

Department of Bioengineering

The wellbeing of postgraduate research students at Imperial is an issue that has been highlighted in previous PRES responses, and is a growing concern nationally. Poor mental health support, coupled with the high pressured environment of Imperial, has been cited by students as reasons why they would not be completing their PhDs.

In recent years, College has taken steps to address this in work done by the *Task and Finish Group for Doctoral Student Wellbeing*, which aimed to improve mental health and wellbeing support of doctoral students at Imperial.

The *Task and Finish Group* worked in partnership with students to develop '*Supporting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Imperial College's Doctoral Students*,' an online course for supervisors. This course is available through Blackboard, and forms part of the College's *Continuing Professional Development Programme* for all supervisors at Imperial.

Alongside this, the Graduate School has worked in partnership with Imperial College Union's Advice Centre to develop '*Wellbeing Webinars*' to encourage postgraduate students to reflect on the importance of maintaining an appropriate work-life balance.

Through the creation of such support provisions, College has demonstrated a welcome recognition of the importance of student wellbeing. However, participation in these provisions should be encouraged, as the introduction of provisions alone will not address the issues faced by our members.

Recommendation

Supervisors across College should be required to take the *Supporting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Imperial College's Doctoral Students* course in order to improve mental health awareness and support provision.



"The PhD has been one of the best experiences of my life. Would repeat it in a heartbeat!"

Department of Computing



"I will complete my research degree program within the institution's expected timescale but I will mentally struggle for the rest of the time that is left. More needs to be done to help research students with the mental toll of undertaking a PhD - this could be things like increasing the amount of space available for postgraduates for relaxation away from the desk, encouraging better work/life balances as an institution and trying to reduce the stigma associated with mental stresses (not just serious illnesses such as depression but conditions that come before that - severe stress, anxiety etc.)"

Department of Surgery and Cancer

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