



POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH REPORT 2023

An analysis of the PGR experience
at Durham University from
the student perspective.

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Foreword:

As everyone involved in this report's creation knows, this is a piece of work that has been a long time in the making, and it is because of this that I am now delighted to finally present this finished report into the experience of Postgraduate Research students here at Durham University.

Despite their central importance to Durham University and its standing as a research intensive institution, PGRs have continually been seen as an afterthought by the university, with very little focus having been given to their specific needs. It was within this context that this report was commissioned and, with it now complete, I am confident that it will lead to productive conversation and stimulate positive change.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without the months of hard work that went into this report, and so I would just like to take a quick moment here to thank all of the PGRs who generously gave up some of their time to provide us data and, of course, all of the SU staff members who worked tirelessly to get the report in the best state it could be, with a specific thank you to our PGR Representative Heidi Shaw.



Freddy Fossey-Warren
Postgraduate Academic Officer

PGR Report 2023

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Section 1: Background & Introduction

In the 2022-23 academic year the SU carried out a research project into the experiences of PGR students studying at Durham University. The experience of PGR students, as students, can often be overlooked at HE institutions nationwide, due to their unusual position of being both staff and students, and the situation is no different here at Durham University. Ahead of the University-led PGR Review, which was launched in 2023, we aimed to gather some raw and authentic data from PGR students, on what their experience has been like studying a PHD at Durham University. We hope this information can help to inform the PGR review and ensure that the wide range of concerns raised throughout this report can be improved via the review process.

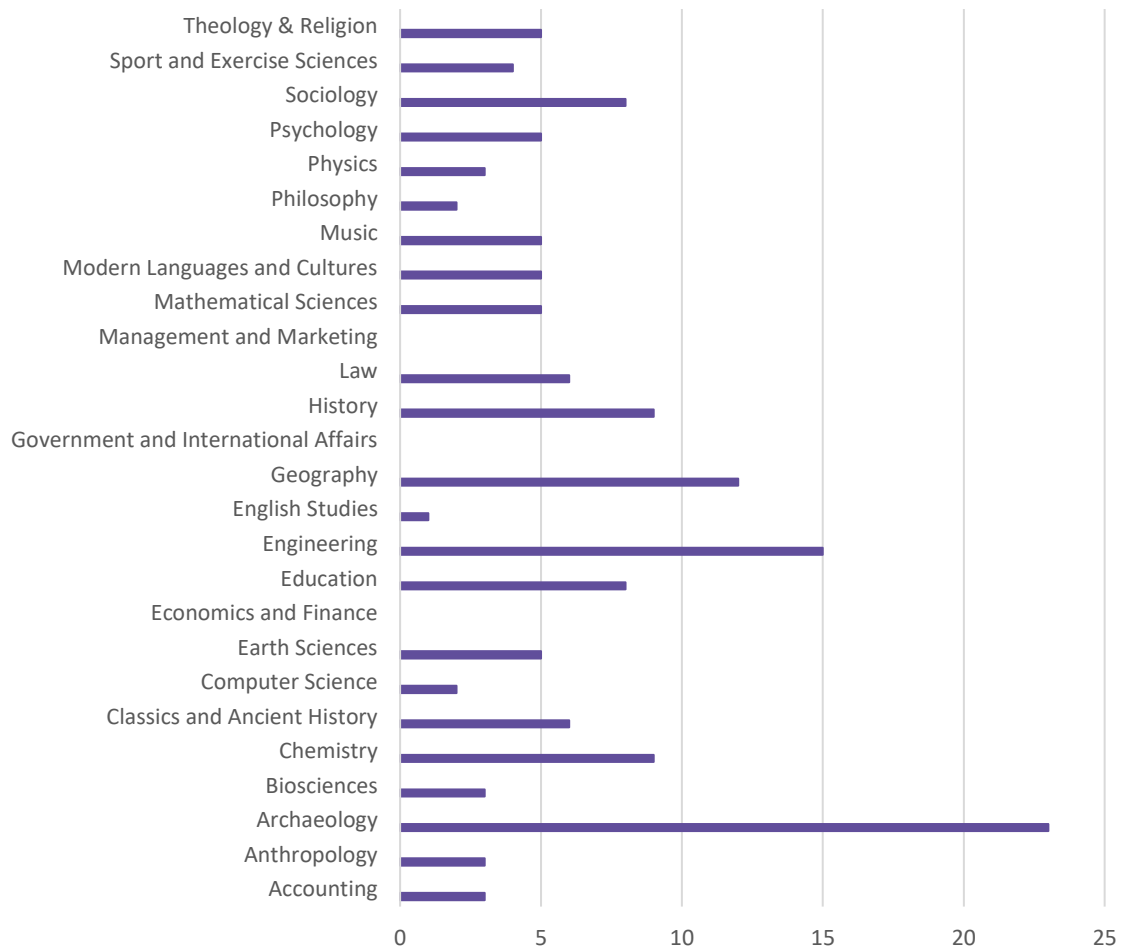
In addition to our own research, an independent group of PGR students simultaneously gathered data from their peers, in response to the University's decision to reintroduce continuation fees. This information was collated in the form of support for an open letter, which has since been sent to the University. The raw data from this process was provided to us by the organisers, to enable further insight and exploration of the issues PGR students face, to support the findings in this report. We've included our summary of their findings and analysis in the appendix to this report.

Section 2: Method & Participant Demographics

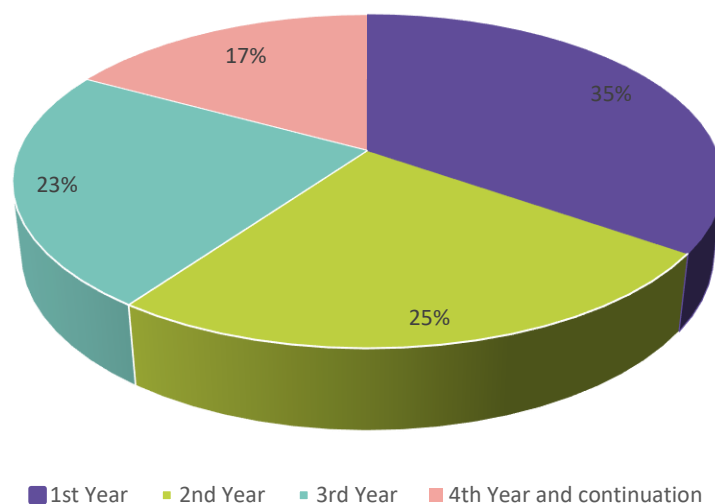
Our approach to data collection was two-fold. We used a mixed-methods approach for this project, combining both quantitative and qualitative survey data, with follow-up open forum discussions. The project focussed on core aspects of life as a PGR student, covering funding, accommodation and travel, social and services, and research. The survey portion of the project was launched in early 2023 and was open for responses for a period of around 8 weeks. We collected some demographic information and included a range of quantitative questions, seeking data on areas like funding and living arrangements to help paint a picture of the PGR experience at Durham. This quantitative approach was supported with free-text questions, to allow for nuance and the diversity of the PGR experience to be captured thoroughly. We then held a series of follow-up focus groups in March 2023, focussing on three main themes: funding, research and life as a PGR. These were designed to enable discussion between participants, identify similarities and differences between experiences, and allow further exploration of both shared benefits and shared issues in life as a Durham PGR student. A thorough analysis of all data from both the survey and focus groups was carried out, and is included in this report.

A total of 147 PGR students participated in the survey across Epiphany term 2023 and overall, we had a good range across the whole PGR population. There was a spread of participants across departments, with representation from all four faculties. The department with the most responses was Archaeology, with 23 PGR students participating. There were four departments with 0 responses: Economics, Management and Marketing, Finance and Government and International Affairs. The lowest participation per faculty was within the Business School.

Graph 1: Participant split by department



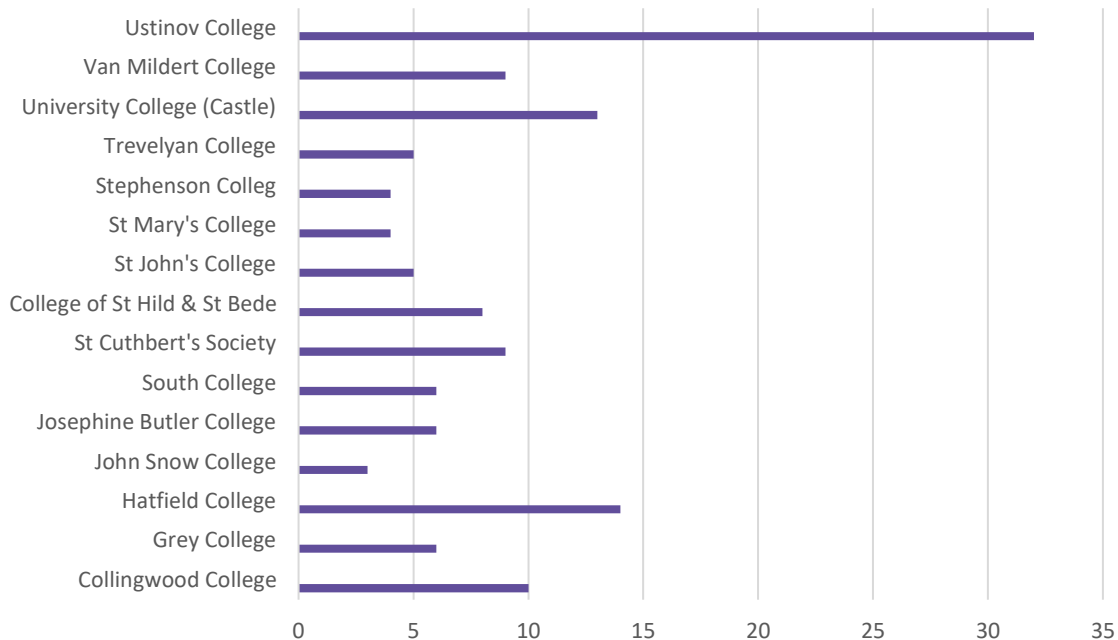
Graph 2: Participant split by year of study



There was also an even spread across year of study, as seen above, and almost 90% of participants identified their mode of study as full-time.

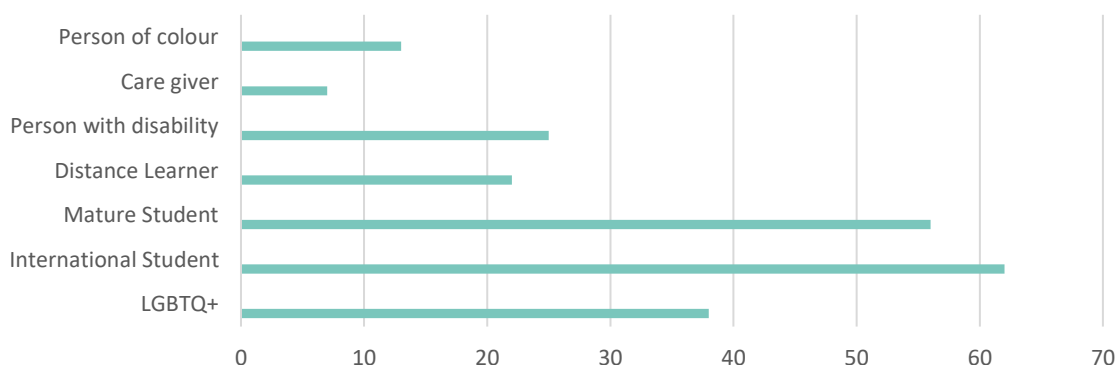
In terms of College representation, we had participants from 15 out of the 17 Durham University Colleges, with the highest proportion at 24%, from Ustinov. There were 0 participants from Stevenson or Aidan's Colleges.

Graph 3: Participant split by College



We also asked participants to tell us more about themselves and any individual characteristics that it would be beneficial to know about, when trying to fully understand the make-up of the PGR community at Durham. Participants could select as many individual characteristics as appropriate for them. There was a significant minority of participants who identified as international students (N=62 out of 147 total), closely followed by identifying as a mature student (N=56), with mature student referring here to anyone who began their postgraduate programme above the age of 25.

Graph 4: Breakdown of individual characteristics identified within participant group



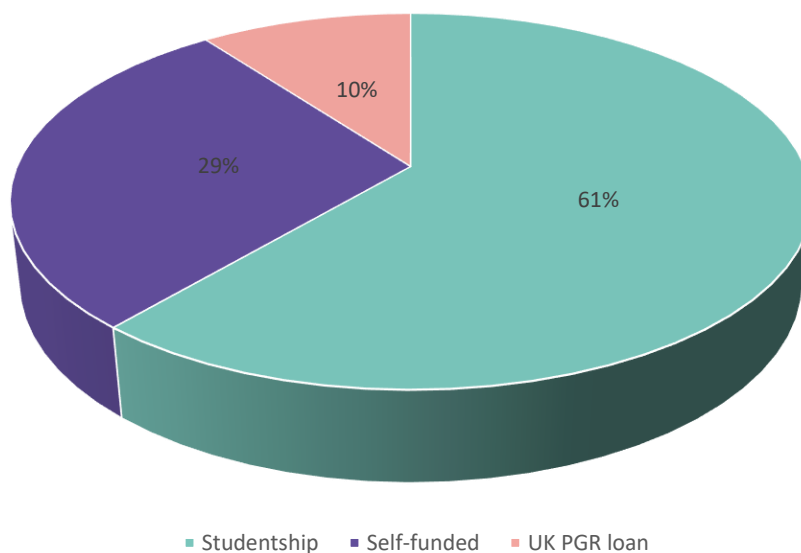
This sample represents just under 10% of the 1606 total number of PGR students enrolled in the 23-24 academic year, and contains an appropriate split across department, college and year of study.

Section 3: Findings and Analysis

3.1. Funding

A key area of PGR experience that arose in all parts of this research was funding. The survey data showed the majority of participants defined their funding arrangement as being through a studentship, at just over 60%. Around 30% of participants were self-funded, and around 10% were funded through a PGR loan. Around 10% also indicated that they used more than one of these funding methods. It is perhaps unsurprising that the majority of participants rely on external sources of funding for their studies, however it is worth noting that this arrangement, similarly to undergraduates, does make PGR students vulnerable to unexpected and sudden increases in their costs, as their ability to increase their funding to match costs is limited. Financial pressure is something we investigate in more depth later in this report and was one of the biggest causes of concern for PGR students who took part in this research.

Graph 5: Split of participant funding arrangements

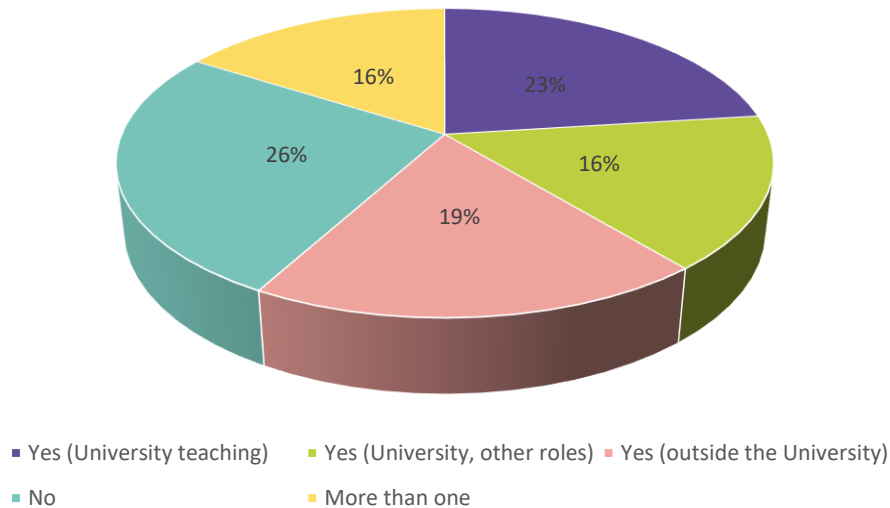


In addition to funding of studies, many PGR students choose to take on a paid employment arrangement, to help cover their living costs. For context, Durham University's fully funded PHD studentship is £15,000 per year (true as of 2020, which is the most recent figure that can be easily sourced on the DU website). In terms of paid employment, just over a quarter of participants responded that they sought no form of employment outside of study. 39% undertake paid employment within the university, either teaching (23%) or in other roles (16%). A further 19% undertake paid employment outside of the University, and 16% are doing a combination of more than one type of employment alongside their studies. This is evidence that the majority of PGR students do choose, or perhaps more accurately need, to find paid employment options, on top of existing funding arrangements, to support them whilst studying.

While we did not ask specific questions regarding wages or salaries, certain conclusions can be extrapolated from the free-text comments. One student suggested that PGRs are habitually exploited for their labour, and many comments complained about a lack of support in regards to the rising costs of living, implying PGR pay is inadequate. Supporting this assertion is the fact that many PGR students who reported being self-funded listed being

employed in both “Uni teaching” *and* “other”, suggesting that employment within the university is not sufficient to live on unless alongside either a studentship or further employment.

Graph 6: Method of employment undertaken alongside studies



During the PGR Forum held on 22 March 2023 via Zoom, students raised some of the problems associated with being employed in teaching at DU, namely relating to HR processes and a lack of transparency. One such issue raised, is that PGRs are paid quarterly by the University, which makes them ineligible for mortgages and renting from some letting agencies. Some claim to have also encountered challenges in obtaining their full pay. Having to fight to get all the pay to which they are entitled is rendered more challenging by the non-itemisation of wages on the payslips. Students who teach also struggle to ensure they receive the back pay from work they do over the summer months. It is perhaps unsurprising that so many PGRs are frustrated with the unusual space they occupy between being staff and students when you consider these such issues.

These concerns also indicate that the necessity to work alongside PGR study creates additional issues and frustrations for PGR students, which in turn then negatively impact on their experience as PGR students. It seems financial pressures due to the lack of external funding are the source of this cycle. One specific source of financial pressure, which was discussed at the March forum, was the recent decision of the University to reintroduce continuation fees for PGR students. A lot of the conversation around this topic focussed on the seemingly ‘sudden’ decision and the lack of communication to PGR students about why. When you consider that the majority of PGR students are reliant on fixed amounts of funding, combined with modes of employment for which they feel underpaid, or for which they struggle to get paid, it is not surprising that this additional cost caused a lot of concern for participants. Further evidence of the frustration from the PGR community, on this issue specifically, can be found in Appendix 1, with the summary of information from the open letter.

3.2. Accommodation & Travel

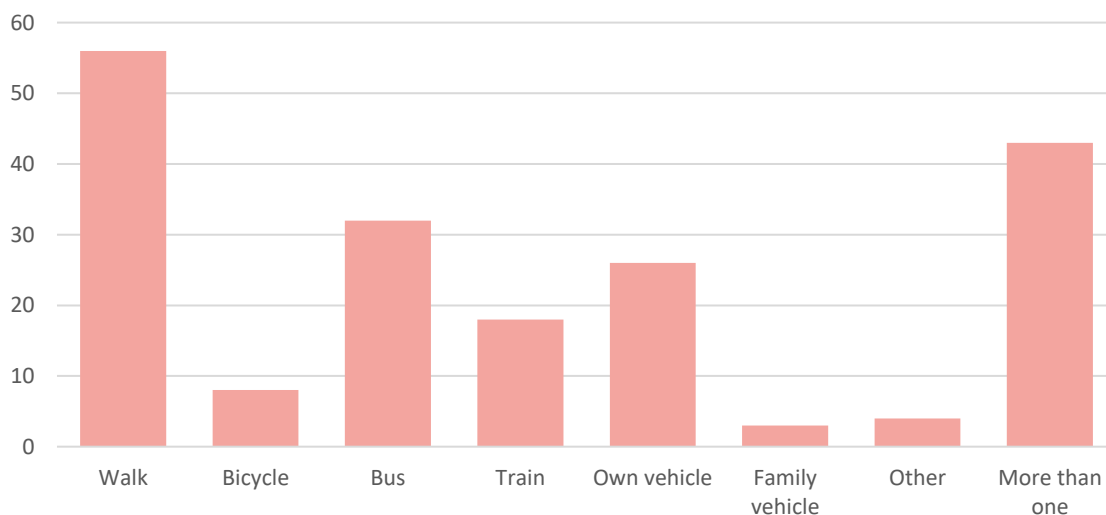
The second area of focus for this project was the living and travel circumstances for PGR students. We know there are growing pressures on the Durham City private accommodation market, due to rising student numbers, and we were interested in whether this had also impacted PGR students. The majority of participants live in private rented accommodation whilst completing their studies (N=84, 57%). Around 15% live in college and around 20% are living in an owned property.

Graph 7: Accommodation type lived in during PGR study



In terms of travel, a significant minority of participants walk to commute to study (N=56, 38.10%). Around 30% of participants use multiple methods of transport to commute, including public transport, such as buses or trains, private vehicles and bikes. Other methods were used in isolation, such as bus or train, by smaller numbers of participants, with 18% having use of their own vehicle.

Graph 8: Mode of transport used to commute to PGR study



In addition to this, most participants (57%) spend 30 minutes or less on their commute, suggesting they live in Durham or in the surrounding areas with easy access to Durham via public transport or use of their own vehicle. However, 17% of participants defined their commute as being 60 minutes or longer, indicating that there is also almost a fifth of

participants who live significantly further away. Analysis of qualitative data suggests that for most students residing within Durham city centre, in colleges or in private rental housing, walking is the main form of commuting between home and study spaces, usually taking 15-30 minutes each way. This would suggest that although rental figures are significantly higher in the city centre than elsewhere, it seems many PGR students do still opt to live within walking distance, and perhaps pay more in rent than they would do if they were willing to have a longer commute.

Those who do choose to live further out of the city centre however, struggle to find appropriate transport routes to access the city. Those with cars complained about parking, stating that it is *“shockingly expensive”* and that *“the window for parking permits is too short”* (the deadline being in October but many PGRs begin in January). A student who drives after doing *“the school/nursery run”* has a student pass that *“is restricted to one car park.”* This student argues, *“My needs are similar to a staff member and I am also a staff member so would appreciate a more flexible parking permit...as my assigned car park is full and I end up paying for parking anyway.”* Another student who lives too far to walk or cycle suggests, *“There are no bus lines near me...but there is nowhere to park,”* the knock-on effect being, *“I have missed out on opportunities to fully access resources due to this.”*

Living away from the city centre may stretch limited funds but comes with associated problems. Cycling into Durham is difficult and unsafe due to hills and traffic, and the University offers poor and limited infrastructure to secure bicycles. Additionally, some distance learners are exceptionally isolated and struggle to feel a sense of community. One mentioned feeling *“alone and isolated”* and admitted to being *“friendless.”* Even a member of the PG college explained their inability to feel socially connected. *“I probably only come into the department once a month so it’s quite an isolated experience. I’ve been to Ustinov once in two years (to pick up my student card) and so the whole collegiate side of things is irrelevant to me.”*

Many students who rely on busses to commute find Durham’s bus system inadequate, offering limited service between the city centre and the pit villages on its outskirts where rent is more affordable and where housing contracts are less likely to be tied to UG timescales within the city centre’s student accommodation hubs in The Viaduct and Gilesgate. Bus service is described as *“confusing”* and *“terrible.”* Students are eligible for discounted fares on some, but not all, services, and think the university should intervene to get broader discounted fares from all bus services. More generally, PG students who are *“increasingly priced out”* of living in the city centre question *“how much value for money we get”* and *“think the university needs to do more for commuter and local PGs to help us feel part of a community.”*

The housing shortage in Durham became untenable for many students in the past year (2022-23). With unknown financial and employment futures, many said they cannot justify the high rents in Durham. Some left Durham part-way through their programmes to move back in with their parents. In the March forum, students claimed to know of others who moved to Newcastle after being unable to find reasonable accommodation in Durham. As weekly rents rose dramatically last year, some students chose to study at other (perhaps less highly ranked) universities because they were guaranteed funding. Although cheaper rents are available in the numerous pit villages surrounding Durham, public transportation is

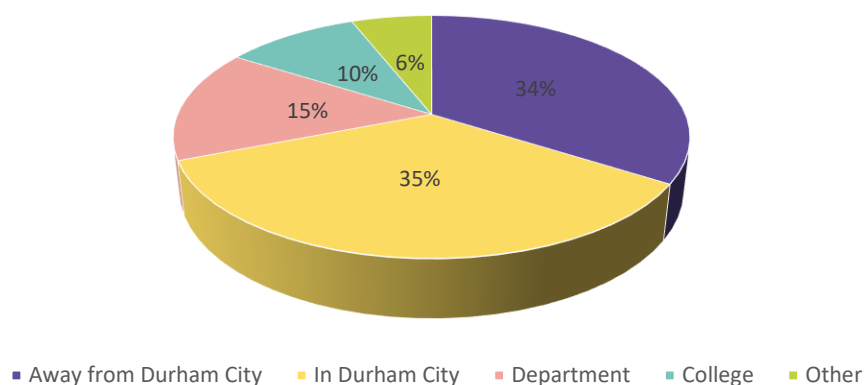
poor and community access is non-existent, contributing to the oft-discussed problem of PGRs not engaging in the social opportunities available in their colleges and among peer groups in their departments. It seems PGR students must make a choice between high rents for commuter convenience, and a difficult commute for cheaper rents. Based on the data from this report, it would suggest the majority still do choose high rents for the convenience of location.

Durham's PGR cohort also includes members who reside such a great distance from Durham that they hardly, if ever, come into their departments. One wrote, *"I've never been to Durham University. I started my research during Covid, all of my research material is in my hometown or at the BM."* For some, Covid-inspired distance learning brought positive changes, especially for those with caring responsibilities. *"I can be more flexible now with my time and can work at home more often, saving money on car journeys."* Some commented, however, that since meetings and lectures have returned to in-person, *"Now I can only participate if they are on Zoom, but most aren't."* Another described hybrid learning as a *"positive off shoot of the pandemic"* that *"helped distance people feel like more active members of the community...feel connected."* For this student, their two-hour commute is not only costly in time and fuel but contributes to feelings of isolation and detachment. *"When I do come to dept/campus, I would like to feel more welcome (as opposed to being ½ way a stranger because I'm not in the Durham bubble)."*

3.3. Social and Services

Another key area that we were interested in exploring, was the wider wellbeing, support, and social aspect of life as a PGR student at Durham. We found that a significant minority of participants spend most of their social time away from Durham City (34%). On par with this, 35% of participants suggest they spend most time socially in Durham City, but with only 15% selecting their department as their most frequent social space and 10% their college. This could be due to the disparity in community feeling across departments and colleges, resulting in some PGR students choosing to spend time within those communities, where those communities are well formed and welcoming, and others choosing to spend time elsewhere, perhaps when community feeling is lacking. A significant number of PGR students also have employment commitments or caring responsibilities however, which could mean that convenience of location for socialising is the driving factor in a lot of instances.

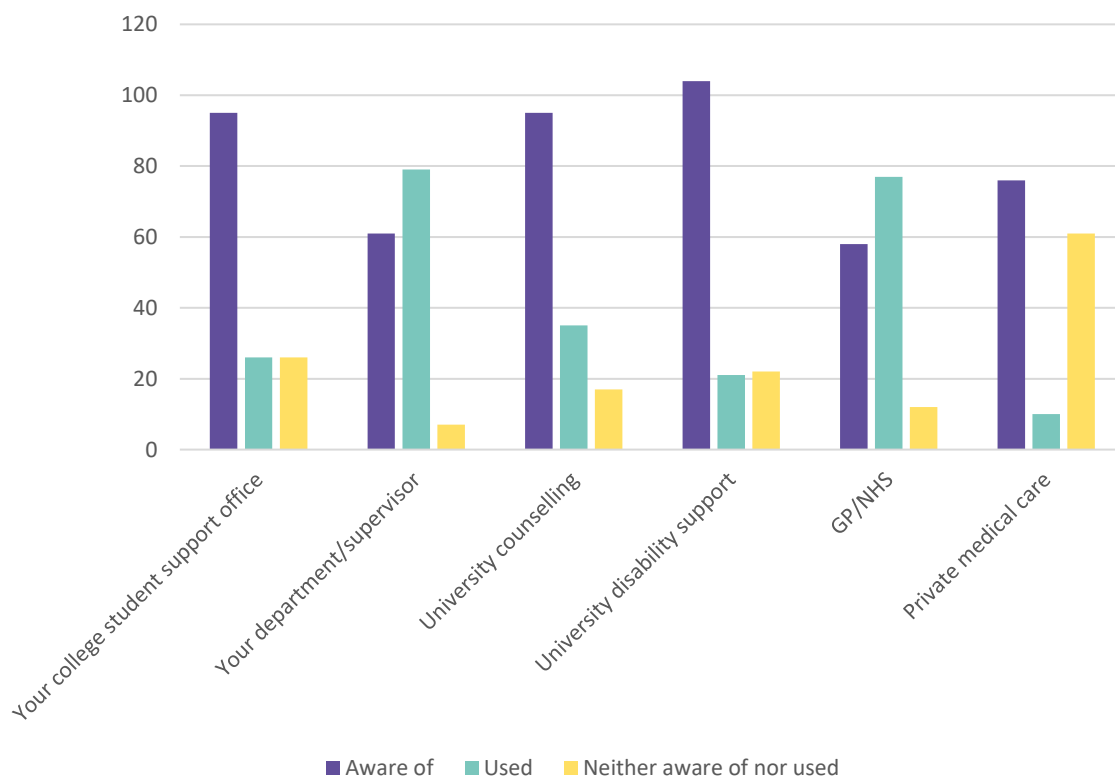
Graph 8: Breakdown of participants' time spent socially by preferred location



In terms of services and support, participants were asked a series of questions about what support services they had used, during their time as students so far, and what their awareness levels of existing support services was like. In relation to Durham SU services specifically, the majority (56%) had not accessed any of Durham SU's services. A number of participants had made use of the social services, such as societies/associations (21%) and our bar and café (14%), but a far lower number had accessed our advice or representative services (both <10%). This could suggest the comms and marketing methods employed by the SU to promote support services are not appropriate for a PGR audience, or alternatively, could imply the support services we offer are not deemed useful to PGR students.

In terms of support services more broadly, participants were asked about their knowledge and usage of other services that exist across the University and broader city. College and central university services (University Counselling and University Disability Support) were most well-known amongst participants, with between 65-70% of participants selecting that they were aware of each of those services, but had not had the need to use them. Departmental or supervisor support services were the most utilised support service by participants, with 54% selecting they had made use of that type of service, and a further 41% selecting that they were aware of the support, should they ever need it. This would suggest participants had a good awareness of central support services and are comfortable accessing departmental support services when needed. Perhaps predictably, costly private medical care was the least well-known and least used support service, while GP/NHS support was the second most frequently used support service.

Graph 9: Breakdown of participants' knowledge and usage of the support services available



The University's Counselling and Disability Services received mixed evaluations from students in the qualitative comments, and generally for the same reasons: helpfulness and

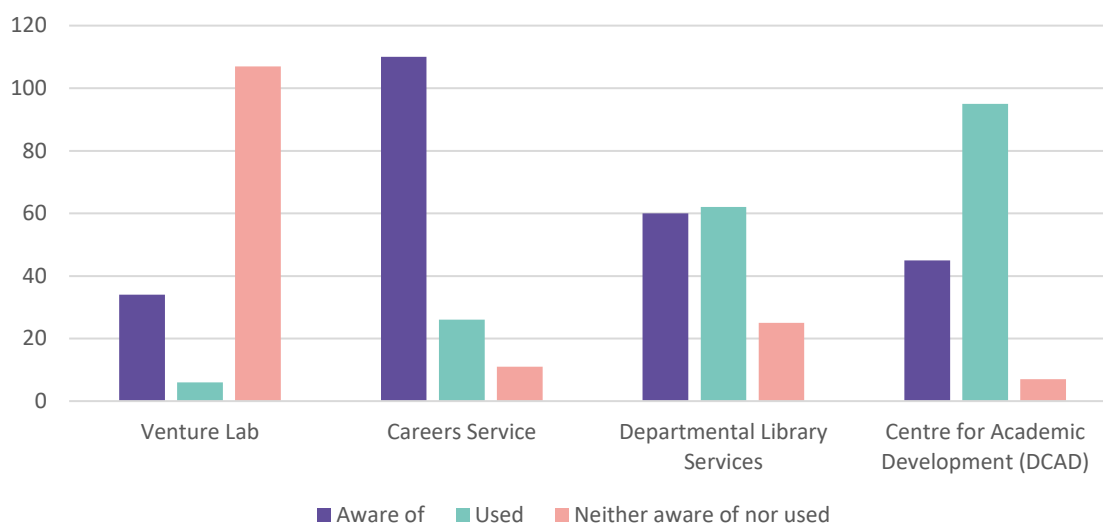
inaccessibility. Both have left students feeling "*pretty terrible*" and "*blown off*." The main complaints surround the limited number of counselling sessions each student is entitled to (6) or the limitations on what DS can do for disabled students. In one such example, "*Disability Support is rather useless for international students; when I tried to find better ways to get to campus as a disabled individual, they effectively only told me such schemes are only available to UK students, and then offered me budgeting advice.*" Another frustrated student noted, "*Disability Services and Counselling Services at this university are almost entirely inaccessible. They never respond to your emails, and when they do, they are confusing, contradictory, and unhelpful.*" They further commented that things would be "*MUCH worse for ESL students.*"

Negative experiences and mental health challenges have historically been the province of colleges, who have recently undergone a student support review in which support staff are trained to empower adult learners to address any difficulties they are experiencing, escalating issues as required and maintaining professional boundaries at all times. PGR students, as our research has shown, are often detached from their colleges and unaware of the support that is offered, and they encounter challenges in self-navigating the complex, interconnected support mechanisms operating across the organisation. "*Colleges are irrelevant to me,*" wrote one PGR student, while another claims to have been "*told to pray away my anxiety and depression despite the fact that I'm an atheist.*" Given these experiences, it is unsurprising that some students "*have mostly just used my supervisors for wellbeing support as they're the people who know me best, and that I feel comfortable approaching...I don't feel there has ever been an emphasis that college support is for PhD students.*"

Two significant issues are highlighted repeatedly in the free-text answers about college student support. First, there is a lack of clear guidance for PGR students, perhaps due to inadequate and/or non-existent inductions that leave them feeling excluded from welfare schemes. Second, if their support needs are severe enough that they require a suspension of study, they found it to be "*really frustrating that when I actually needed it, that support wasn't available.*" While it is reasonable for students who are out on concession to be excluded from university services as a strategy for taking time to heal, it seems that some students perceive suspension of studies as punitive rather than supportive, and communications surrounding such decisions might require more sensitivity. College APs, Mental Health Advisors, and now, Faculty Student Support Officers, bear responsibility for ensuring that PGRs understand the full scope, as well as limitations, of support systems for DU students, regardless of age, ability, nationality, residence, and fee status as a back-end component of a residency concession. Similarly, this information needs to be emphasised by both departments and colleges as a front-end aspect of inductions.

In relation to academic services specifically, the facility participants knew the least about by far was the Venture Lab, with 73% of participants selecting that they were neither aware of nor had they used this service. The most commonly used academic service was the Centre for Academic Development (DCAD), with 65% of participants having used this service and a further 31% being aware that it exists, should they need it. The majority of participants were aware of, or had used, their departmental library facilities, however there were still 17% of participants who were not aware, nor had they used departmental library services. Usage of the careers service amongst participants was low, at 18%, however 75% of participants were aware of the service should they ever need it.

Graph 10: Breakdown of participants' knowledge and usage of academic services available



PGR students who participated in our survey wrote more positively about academic services than pastoral services in their free-text comments. The lone student who commented on the Venture Lab had *“a wonderful experience with the EDAPT session”* and made *“some of my ‘best friends of all times’ during the mock pitch.”* The Careers Service has proven a bit more hit and miss for PGRs who have used it. A few praised their individualised 1-hour sessions as *“very useful”* and the staff as *“fantastic,”* however, others believe the service to be *“geared towards UG students and rarely has events that are relevant to PhD students looking to move into industry or to change sector.”* Another wrote that they would *“like to hear from the Career Service more about how to find an academic position in a UK university.”* Another found their appointment *“not very useful,”* and they *“wanted more specialised guidance from the appointment that I did not get.”*

DCAD was widely praised by PGRs in our survey and seems to be providing excellent and relevant skills training courses. The only two unfavourable comments were critical only in that the courses offered *“have been too generalised”* and *“are often so broad that they are not useful or particularly relevant for my degree.”* One student wishes *“there were more tailored options”* specific to each department. These negative comments are vastly outnumbered by rave reviews from dozens of PGRs who have found DCAD to be *“Super,” “fabulous,” “very helpful,” “very pleasing,” “outstanding,”* and *“Great!”* One praises the service as being *“one of the best things about Durham University...the staff are friendly and good teachers...the courses offered provide the detailed skills I want to learn during my postgraduate degree.”* Many indicated they are repeat users who have *“used DCAD for a range of different things”* including academic skills, writing, statistical analysis, self-promotion (via CVs, Linked In), literature reviews, annotated bibliographies, and conference planning.

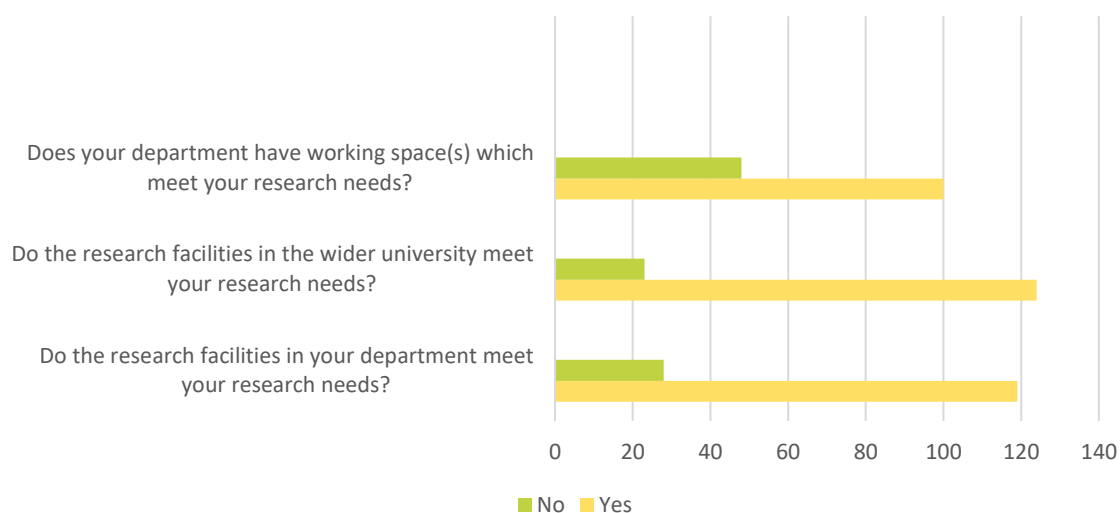
PGR students are generally happy with the library resources, though it was not always clear in their free-text comments which library they were referring to (department, faculty, or main). They do not seem to use their college libraries, especially if they live out. Positives include helpful and knowledgeable librarians, rapid responses to book requests, a stellar interlibrary loan policy and flexibility toward PG students' needs, as well as excellent archival resources.

Of course, access to research resources is only one reason libraries are essential. They also serve as study spaces, the topic of all negative comments relating to libraries. One student notes that too little space is afforded to PG students in the main library (only 10 hot desks in the PGR room). When coupled with a need for privacy for marking, the problem of insufficient study space becomes more significant. Add to that the long commute some students must make, it is unsurprising they wish for a guaranteed space in which to work between appointments. It was suggested that most departments could offer more dedicated study space, and that screens into which laptops could be plugged to allow students the use of dual screens would be massively helpful with a low investment in equipment. When it was revealed in the March forum that some departments not only offer their PGRs study and social spaces, but a functional kitchen and CIS-funded equipment (as opposed to equipment costs coming out of studentships), the conversation quickly turned to unequal funding and the problems with varying support for PGRs across departments.

3.4. Research

The final aspect of PGR life that we focussed on during this project, was research. Participants were asked a series of yes/no questions to establish baseline satisfaction with the facilities and supervision they receive in relation to their research. Overall, the majority of participants were satisfied that their departmental research facilities met their needs (81%) and that the research facilities in the wider university met their needs (84%). A higher proportion of participants disagreed that the departmental working spaces were suitable for their research needs (32%), linking to evidence from the previous section on lack of study space, however the majority were still in agreement that working spaces within departments were suitable.

Graph 11: Breakdown of participants' satisfaction with research facilities



The most positive response to any area of PGR life that we investigated during this project, was on satisfaction with supervision. 89% of respondents agreed that they were satisfied with their supervision, which is a credit to all the hard work supervisors put into supporting their students.

Further analysis of qualitative responses shows that PGR students who completed our survey were largely highly satisfied with their supervision, using superlatives such as, “*absolutely amazing*,” “*excellent*,” and “*understanding and supportive*” in describing their supervisors. Negative comments tended to describe supervisors as “*disinterested*” and “*unhelpful*,” and “*slow to offer feedback*,” or in cases where students have supervisors in more than one department, one is more supportive than the other.

The positive descriptions from the free-text comments do not always specify what about the supervision earned the comment, however, more than few PGR students clearly indicate that they have received pastoral support from their supervisors, making it difficult to tease apart the way students evaluate pastoral and academic support they have received. This is further supported by our findings in section 3, where participants selected that they most frequently use their department/supervisor support services. According to one, “*My department and supervisors did a great job in supporting me and getting me the help I needed.*” Another explained, “*My supervisors have been really good for wellbeing and pastoral support during my PhD, particularly when going through family bereavement & estrangement.*” This student further noted, “*I was disappointed when the university advertised an estrangement group, only to not run it...the follow up was ‘just to contact counselling service’ if we needed anything, but that isn’t really what I was after.*” There have been positive steps taken by the University already in addressing the growing need for pastoral support in faculties and departments, through the launch of the Student Support Project for 2023-24. This model allows for students to choose to access support from a range of points across the University, and aims to clarify both the responsibilities, and the boundaries, of all staff in student-facing roles. Our research does suggest that PGR students are most likely to reach out for support within their department under the previous model, so it will be interesting to see whether the Student Support Project changes result in a wider range of support mechanisms being utilised by PGR students for the 23-24 academic year.

Section 4: Conclusion

Consistently throughout the analysis of the findings in this report we see complaints levied against the University for not fulfilling its perceived responsibility to its PGR students. While there are certain aspects of the PGR experience that Durham excels in, namely the quality of supervision and research facilities, there are many more areas in which Durham University unfortunately lets its PGR students down. Our findings suggests that this is a process that begins almost as soon as students arrive, with a lack of adequate induction seeing students unsure of the financial, academic or pastoral support resources available, and a heavy focus on the lack of pastoral support being provided. Tied to this, the evidence suggests that very little effort has been made to integrate PGR students into their respective college communities, around which many of these support resources are managed, naturally leading to many PGRs being unaware of where to find necessary resources when the need arises. The introduction of hybrid teaching and learning has been both a help and a hindrance to the feeling of community, and it seems now that hybrid practices are being embedded into learning permanently, rather than temporarily, there has been a knock on effect for the PGR sense of belonging and community at Durham.

The ongoing housing crisis and cost-of-living crisis have seen more PGR students living out of Durham and working part-time jobs. The reality of the situation though, is that public transport infrastructure is not adequate for commuting PGR students, and this is resulting in a diminished experience overall. It seems that PGR students are having to choose between affordability and experience when it comes to housing and costs.

Many members of the COVID cohorts are still working to finish their degrees, often without much University mitigation. Within this context we are seeing a group of PGRs in desperate need of support from the University which has failed to materialise. This issue has only been compounded by the decision to reintroduce continuation fees, a decision made all the more worse due to the lack of student consultation in the matter. The strength of feeling behind this additional financial pressure can be understood in the context of the 556 signatories to an open letter calling for the University to reverse this decision (further details in Appendix 1).

Durham University styles itself as a leading research-intensive University, and PGRs are undeniably the backbone of said research. Despite this, the wants and needs of PGR students are consistently overlooked and ignored by University management, as demonstrated in this research. This puts undue pressure on not only PGR students, but also their supervisors, many of whom, as reflected in this report, are forced to pick up the slack in regards to providing pastoral care for their supervisees. Ultimately, this fundamentally comes back to a lack of communication and transparency on the part of the university, and the message that gives to PGR students of them being an afterthought.

Section 5: Recommendations

1. Funding

- 1.1 A full cost of living analysis must be done to identify what the true cost of being a PGR student living in Durham is in 2023, and amendments made to studentship payments to reflect increasing costs.
- 1.2 PGR teaching contracts and payment arrangements should be standardised across departments, payments should be made monthly without delay and an itemised breakdown on payslips provided as standard.
- 1.3 There needs to be a step-change in communication. There needs to be consistent and transparent communication with PGR students from the central University, rather than always through departments, informing well in advance of any upcoming changes, particularly those with financial implications, and allowing for proactive and genuine consultation, as per the [Student Consultation Framework](#).

2. Accommodation and travel

- 2.1 The arrangement with DCC bus services must be reviewed, both in terms of pricing for student commuters and in terms of existing routes, and secure a more wide-spread, frequent and affordable public transport network to the surrounding areas of Durham City.
- 2.2 Parking permit arrangements for PGRs should also be updated to those of DU staff members, to enable flexibility in parking in terms of location, and help to reduce costs of commuting.
- 2.3 Community building within colleges for PGR students needs to be considered differently to the standard UG model. A more varied and holistic approach to community building, combining both living and studying situations, needs to be implemented and appropriate infrastructure put in place to foster continuous

community building throughout the course of PGR study.

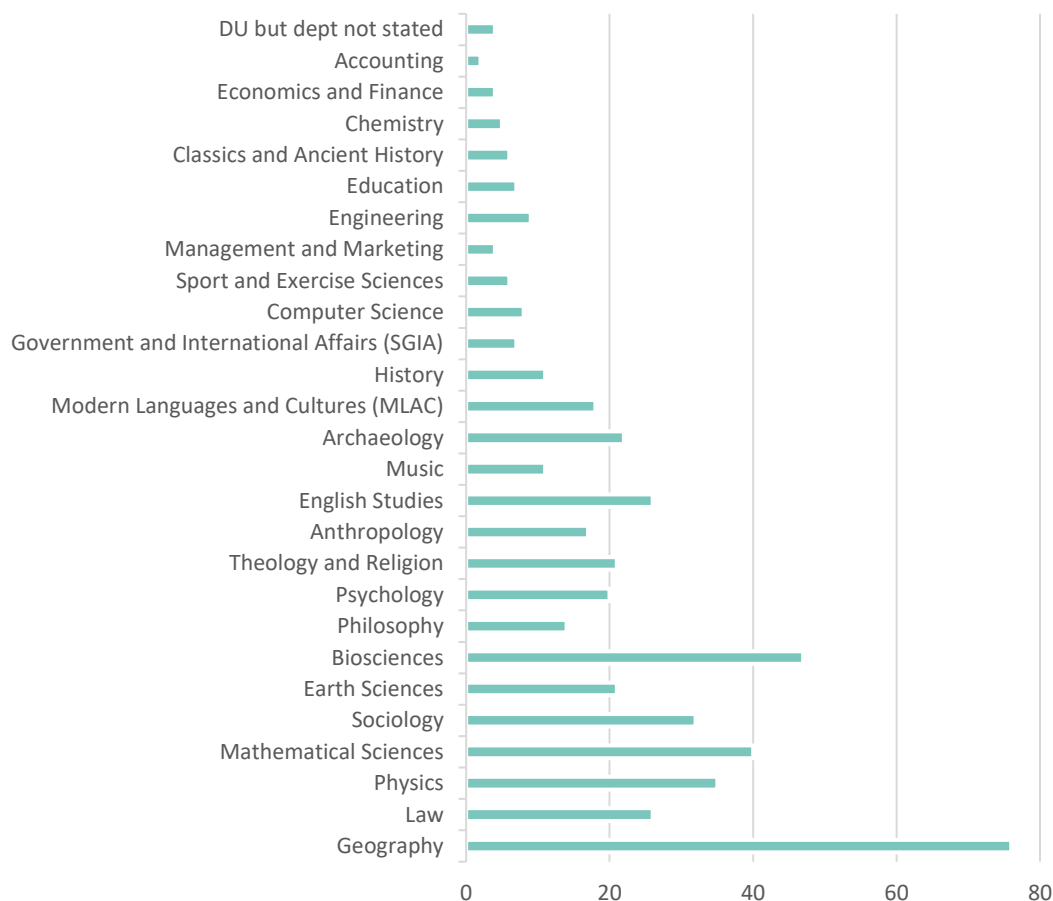
3. Social and services

- 3.1 PGR induction must be standardised across departments and core aspects of life as a PGR student at Durham must be included, such as college community integration and an introduction to support services.
- 3.2 Central University support services need to introduce an offer tailored for PGR students specifically, that is distinctly different from their UG offer. For instance, the Careers Service needs to introduce a PGR specific careers advice offer, including specialist advice on how to best secure an academic position, as well as PGR level external employment options, and have staff members trained to deliver this advice. The Counselling Service needs to review whether the existing referral methods and the standard 6 sessions per student model are appropriate for PGR students, who are both students and staff members.
- 3.3 There needs to be more dedicated study space for PGR students that is suitably private for marking and conveniently located on campus for commuting PGR students. This additional study space could be provided within departments, which would also help to provide equality in experience compared the currently disparate study space and facilities between departments.

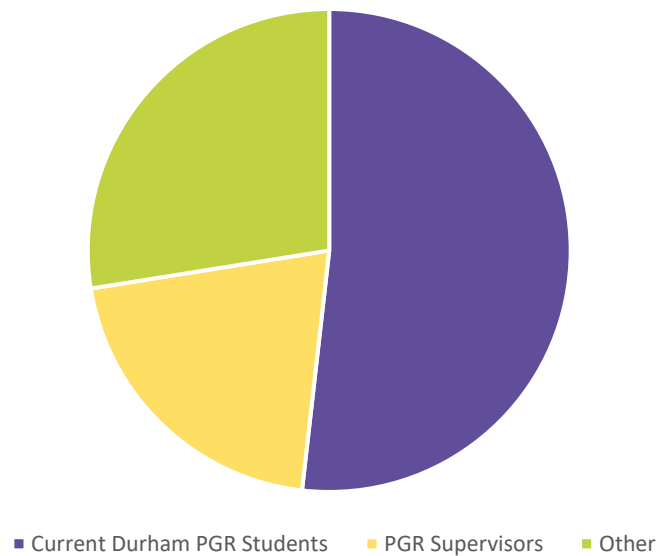
Appendix 1 Summary of Additional Evidence: Continuation Fees Open Letter

Subsequent to our survey, an open letter was drafted and signed by a number of PGR and non-PGR students to protest the university's decision to reintroduce continuation fees. Alongside providing their signatures, many students also took the time to provide free-text comments which provide useful additional qualitative data to be appended to the broader PGR survey. In total 556 signatures were collected of which 288 (52%) were current PGR, with representation from each academic department, and 115 (21%) were PGR supervisors, with representation from 20 of the 26 academic departments, with the Geography department being the most represented. In total there were 46 free-text comments and, of those 46, 28 were from PGR students, with, again, the most represented department being Geography with 5.

Graph 1: Open letter signatures by department



Graph 2: Participant signatures by position



Within the free-text comments, one of the most common complaints was in relation to the lack of support being provided to PGRs in the wake of COVID-19, with 11 of the comments mentioning COVID in some capacity. Here, comments highlighted the fact that the original reasoning for removing continuation fees was due to the impact the pandemic had on Postgraduate Research; despite this fact, the continuation fees are set to be reintroduced before many PGRs impacted by the pandemic have finished their degrees, with one respondent in the Earth Sciences department pointing out that they have had no laboratory access for data collection since March 2020.

On top of the continuing issues related to the pandemic, many also highlighted the ongoing cost of living crisis, pointing out the extent to which the reintroduction of continuation fees was applying undue stress and financial pressure on many PGRs, especially those from marginalised and disadvantaged backgrounds, a fact that, in being overlooked by the University, directly contradicts the University's commitment to EDI. This ties directly into the lack of general support, financial or otherwise, provided by the university to PGR students outlined in the main report.

Throughout the free-text comments were also concerns regarding the impact the reintroduction of continuation fees would have on the quality of the research being performed. Consistently, respondents highlighted 3 years as an often unattainable goal for the length of a PhD and many worried that the reintroduction of continuation fees would incentivise students to rush their research to meet unfair deadlines; as one student in the Theology and Religion department highlighted "*completing a UK PhD with quality material in 3 years is impossible.*"