

# The Honesty Project

Postgraduate  
Research  
Mental Health  
at UEA

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## **Introduction**

I believe there is a crisis in PGR mental health. That may seem like a bold statement, but this is an issue that has too often not got the attention it needs and is now at breaking point. Students suffering from mental health issues because of their studies report feeling brushed under the carpet; as an embarrassing truth that no one wants to acknowledge. Too often students are told it is just 'all part of the job' to suffer from depression, anxiety, or severe isolation/loneliness as a symptom of their studies. We know that being a Postgraduate researcher is hard, but are we really expecting the resilience of a surgeon to endure the trauma of writing a thesis?

Over the summer, we ran a survey through Postgraduate Research students to find out more on the issue and found out that the results are worse than we expected. A recent report at Exeter gave the issue much deserved national attention, but we were shocked to discover that in many categories the experience of our students were much worse. Many of them reported having major form of stress, anxiety, sleep deprivation and in some cases depression, strictly related to their studies. The survey showed a low tolerance for international students and a significant lack of support for many of them. This can't go on.

That's why we have developed a project shining a light on Postgraduate Research students' mental health. We are calling it the 'Honesty Project', hoping to empower students to speak out about their issues, raise awareness of services, and tackle stigmas within academia. Mental health can be a taboo subject, but we want to dig deep to the root of the problem to find inspiring solutions and challenge the university to take bold steps to support the wellbeing of our postgraduate researchers.

Mental health stigma within academia affects all of us. Let's do something about it.



**Liam McCafferty**

**Postgraduate Education Officer 2015-16**

## Background

For a number of years there has been a growing concern that postgraduate research students disproportionately suffer from a variety of mental health conditions. There has been some speculation as to the causes in the media, much it focusing on the increasingly resilience required to complete a PhD or doctoral-level qualification. Convention wisdom, as to be found in the likes of *PhD Comics*, is that when it comes to the impact on wellbeing, it really is "tough to complete a PhD".

These allusions to the issues surround PGR mental health were brought to national attention in the summer of 2015 when research carried out by Exeter Guild of Students revealed some shocking statistics on the mental health of their members.<sup>1</sup> In their research some 85% of the 165 respondents stated that their work had caused them stress but, much more alarmingly, 40% believed that their physical and mental health had worsened as a result of studying at a doctoral-level.

The key questions are likely to be: what are the issues that mean there is a PGR-specific problem (as opposed to UG/PGT), and why is this a problem now. Some of the potential causes have been identified by NUS and other commentators:

- Marketisation: uncertainty of research contracts + increased focus on metric-driven targets within research
- Culture of acceptance
- Pressure on institutional support structures
- More external pressures – family, work, etc.
- Independent structure – independent research can be isolating, less contact with academics and peers, big change from UG/PGT
- Complex workloads – juggling multiple things at once, often hit bottlenecks and unforeseen obstacles
- Career pressures – part-time work, pressure to publish/attend conferences/write proposals
- Funding and resources – often a perpetual issue
- Relationship with supervisor(s)

Some of these issues are traditionally accepted aspects of consequences of doctoral-level study, such as the possible impact of an independent mode of study on wellbeing. Others however, such as the increasingly insecurity in the academic labour market, are comparatively recent contributions. What appears

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/forty-per-cent-of-phds-at-exeter-suffer-ill-health-study-reveals/2019540.article>

to be the case is that rather than a change in HE policy or another easily-identifiable single cause, the roots of the problem are more likely to constitute a series of quantitative changes summing into a 'perfect storm'. In some of these instances it may be that PGR students, as often being on the 'coal face', find themselves disproportionately affected by changes in research culture within institutions driven by policy changes on a national level.

Students made clear to the Union of UEA Students that this was an issue they wished to explore at UEA and so in the autumn term the SU developed a programme intended to raise the profile of PGR mental health under the banner of 'The Honesty Project' – named to reflect the focus on our aim to get students and academics talking and being honest about PGR Mental Health. The beginning of this was the issuing a survey with the aim to gauge the scope of the perceived problem at UEA. The result of this survey are laid out in the following sections which aim to draw together themes identified by our Postgraduate research community. The Union of UEA Students is under no illusion that this report is exhaustive and, if anything, it has served to make clear that this is an area of work which will require continued and probing work over the next few years – but what we want to do is to start a conversation that acknowledges this issue for the crisis that we believe it has become.

## **Methodology**

The evidence presented in this report was collected using an anonymous survey distributed by the PGR Service via email to all postgraduate research students studying at UEA. Alongside this there was also generalised promotion to the PGR community from the Students' Union.

The survey made clear to respondents that the information was collected on behalf of the Postgraduate Education Officer with a view to shaping the campaign going forward. Those responding were advised that the information they submitted would be used in confidence without revealing the identity of the respondent.

There were a total of 162 responses (approximately 14% of the total number of research students at UEA) collected via the survey with the majority of respondents (88%) being involved in full-time study. This is slightly different to the makeup of our postgraduate population with approximately 16% of students currently involved in part-time study at this level.

50% of respondent were funded by a studentship with a further 26% funded via a Research Council.

The vast majority of respondents lived in Norwich and the surrounding area with only 8% living more than 30 miles from UEA. Very few respondents (only 4%) lived on the UEA campus.

56% of respondents reported that they didn't work whilst studying with a further 25% reporting that they worked between 1 and 10 hours per week. 9% reported that they worked in excess of 30 hours per week, half of whom were studying part-time.

Of those who responded to the survey 28% declared themselves to have a pre-existing mental health issue before starting their studies.

The survey was open for responses for a two week period from the end of August until the beginning of September 2015.

## The Headlines

From the initial analysis the key findings of the survey were as follows:

- 77% of respondents had suffered stress whilst studying
- Some 76% of respondents had suffered with anxiety whilst studying
- 58% stated that they had been depressed whilst studying
- 52% reported that they had sleeping problems whilst studying
- 45% experienced isolation and loneliness whilst studying
- Only 6% of respondents reported that they had no experience of mental health issues whilst studying

Following this question, we asked to what extent their studies were a factor in lessening their mental health. 80% said it was a contributor with 24% saying it was very strongly a factor.

When asked to expand on why they had selected the answer above one respondent said: *"The narrative from the very first induction of my PhD was that it would "break" me, "drive me mad" and make me "miserable"*

Things which were regularly reported as things which impacted on mental health were:

- Studies and anxiety/stress around performance
- A lack of personal or academic support for students
- The effect of isolation and loneliness of study
- The financial burden of study

One respondent also commented on the competitive, "winners and losers" narrative surrounding PGR study saying *"Making comparisons between myself and others caused anxiety and depression."*

## Community

Clearly due to the nature of postgraduate research level study, the importance of a robust and supportive community takes on additional importance. Throughout the research a number of respondents raised the lack of community and peers support as something which negatively impacted on their mental wellbeing.

*"I feel supervisors are very supportive [sic], but there are a lack of social or 'community' supports for PGR Students"*

It became apparent that those students who worked in district subject areas, rather than in laboratories for example, faced specific challenges around isolation and the effects of this.

*"There is a lot of self-doubt and it is a very lonely thing to do. There is not strong sense of community"*

Those who take time away from UEA also face difficult situations with re-assimilating on their return to study:

*"When I came back from field work I had a breakdown, which took me a few years to fully recover from. I became very isolated and lost contact with all my friends"*

When asked to rank where students would seek well-being support the two most highly rated answers were "family" and "friends" with 71% selecting family as the most likely place to turn for support and 77% saying friends. Whilst supervisors were and other services were well thought of, these results undoubtedly outline the importance of a close personal support network.

The importance of facilitating a healthy culture of peer support and community networks was highlighted in particular. This can function as a 'release valve' for the tensions and pressures that many students face. However one respondent felt that more work was to be done in facilitating school-based communities:

*"There is no culture of pastoral support at UEA within Schools"*

These networks should exist at every level: recognising that, for example, the culture existing in some lab-based networks can present their own tensions and pressures. One respondent felt concerned at what they felt was:

*"[...]Disgusting treatment of PhD in other labs by their awful supervisors really depresses me. Especially when I cannot do anything about it and the university resents my involvement."*

The lack of this network, and therefore support, becomes more pronounced when we look at international students. Aspects of International PGR student wellbeing is something we wish to consider in more depth as part of future research projects. 45% of respondents reported from suffering from isolation/loneliness during their studies. One respondent said:

*"I experienced stress and anxiety related to the pressure determined by being for the first time a student in a foreign country. Working in a different language, adjusting to a different culture, have been sometimes difficult."*

Supervisors appear to have taken on a key role in providing some initial 'release valve' pastoral care that may otherwise take place through peer support, with 42% of respondents stating that they had discussed personal issues with their supervisor. Whilst this is interesting to note and be aware of, clearly the number implies a "mixed bag" surrounding this practise. The role of supervisor in terms being a positive influence on wellbeing was discussed in another question with 37% of respondents saying their supervisor had a positive or extremely positive impact on their wellbeing. Again, this is to be noted and celebrated whilst keeping in mind the 66% who felt otherwise.

Whilst the immediacy of personal relationships and networks is fore-fronted in this chapter it is important to recognise other, somewhat less tangible stressors. When asked what had caused your mental health issues one respondent stated:

*"Partly the pressures resultant from the increasing marketization of higher education, partly the irresponsible behaviour of senior management, partly the constant pressures of time"*

Another respondent noted the perceived feeling of being in a system which values information matrixes above individuals:

*"The pressure from UEA/supervisors feels like more to do with stats than student wellbeing."*

It is easy to forget the role of postgraduate research students as early career researchers however clearly they are privy to, and in some cases most affected by, the recent changes to the higher education sector in the UK.

## **Recommendations**

- 1) There should be a recognition of the importance of support networks and communities at all levels: at school, faculty, and institutional level, and to ensure that each level of support is resourced adequately. The SU should be recognised as a key partner in the facilitating of a PGR community and supported accordingly, in particular in developing the new Graduate Centre into being a 'central hub' for the PGR student community.
- 2) Special attention should be paid to groups of students who may find it more challenging to integrate into the academic communities. Where necessary additional resource should be identified to support the integration of international students, student parents, part-time students and those who learn at distance.

## Expectations

A recurring theme in our data was one around expectations. Expectations in terms of being aware of what is expected of a PGR student and then in turn what the student can reasonably expect from others.

Students reported that they would benefit from clarity on the type and amount of work that their study will involve, as well as better support in being able to recognise their own capacities.

*"The pressure to produce publications led to anxiety, and I felt disappointed with myself why I couldn't meet the challenge."*

Some students implied that they felt they were not fully aware of what doctoral-level would entail and of how they could gain support and guidance as part-time of a predominately independent mode of study. Students also reported that there was a perceived pressure to gain skills and experiences outside of core learning outcomes that presented a further burden:

*"[...] it was more a case of being expected to do extra in the student community, the pressure of having as many experiences and extra activities to add to your CV as possible."*

*"There is endless pressure that your PhD is not enough and that we should be doing outreach activities/ networking/publishing/conferences etc."*

The expectations placed on PGR students by supervisors or research teams in particular came out as something which could be detrimental to PGR student mental health.

*"The pressure put on me by my supervisor caused stress and anxiety."*

Another student comment that members of the PGR community were also making, at times, unfair judgements about what could reasonably be expected of one another:

*"I feel that there is a bit of a culture of being expected to work as much as possible among some groups of students and with some supervisors. When I've had to work less hours, or come in at slightly irregular times because of some of my mental health issues, I've nearly always received a negative comment about it from someone in my office."*

Many of the comments in the survey indicated that supervisors' expectations vary hugely and put some students out of their comfort zones. An examples of this that was mentioned several times throughout the survey was the pressure to teach on top of the research aspects of the course, and the comparative lack of guidance that came with this.

Of 27 respondents who choose to comment on feeling pressured to do more or take on additional responsibilities, 17 put this down to pressures from others rather than feeling the need to "push themselves". It's apparent that whilst there is some weight in saying that PGR students strive to take on additional

things, for a variety of reasons, a number are also feeling that this is something levied at them by others.

The issue of developing resilience and skill in managing stress and the pressure of postgraduate research level study was alluded to by a number of respondents in the research.

*"Pressure at work is normal [...] But I had never had the health problems I've had here during my PhD and I had never seen people quitting because they had a nervous breakdown."*

Resilience training is already thought to be critical in schools such as MED and HSC where students are often placed in highly stressful and emotive situations. It is possible that resilience training could be incorporated into the training outcomes for PGR students more generally, in order to deal better with setbacks and to help students to manage their own expectations. There is a concern however that incorporating themes of resilience into PGR training does not address the question as to whether it is appropriate that students should require extensive resilience in order to complete doctoral-level study.

### **Recommendations**

- 1) To consider how primary supervisors provide pastoral care, and to ensure that all academic and administrative staff expected to deliver that support are trained to the appropriate level.
- 2) To ensure that the development of skills to enable students to manage their own expectations of workload and capacity is properly integrated as core aspects of the research training framework, and is considered in the Doctoral Training Working Group. Particular consideration should be given to building upon and expanding the support offered in developing those skills through the Learning Enhancement Team.

## **Work/Life Balance**

The postgraduate research community have a different set of demands placed on them when compared to other levels of study. Balancing the burden of study and personal demands takes on extra importance when the vast majority of tasks are self-directed and decent time management becomes of central importance.

As displayed in the results to questions 4 and 6, around 12% of respondents work between 11 and 30 hours a week, and around 15% of respondents have caring responsibilities. Many of the comments in the survey indicated PGR students finding difficulty in balancing their work, study, social and home commitments. This is something that the Union are keen to explore further to provide as much support as possible.

Respondents pointed out that often the initial stressors were external to their studies but these later impacted on their work.

*"The initial stressor was external to my studies however, the workload and pressure compounded this factor making it more difficult to deal with and in the end escalated and maintained my stress levels far beyond the pressure far beyond the initial stressor"*

Respondents also mentioned the nature of PGR study highlighting things in their person life which they had not addressed previously:

*"PhD study is very intense and requires time spent with self - this can unearth longstanding or new problems"*

A number of those completing the survey (14%) stated they had caring responsibilities which add another dimension to their time management equation. Of those that stated they had a caring responsibility 78% had suffered from anxiety when compared to 76% of those without caring responsibilities.

*"I am a mother of a child of 2 years, I have get married, was pregnant and giving birth to my child while my course and that has a sever effect to my way of studying and how I should manage my time."*

When asked what information they would pass onto themselves if they were able to start again one respondent stated they would: *"be more realistic about the pressure of studying and raising a family"*

A number of respondents stated that paid work, both internal and external, had negatively impacted their mental health whilst studying. 38% of respondents stated that their job had a negative impact on their wellbeing and work/life balance.

*"My job has had a very negative impact at times - it is a stressful job working front-line with people in crisis, doing long days and commuting."*

Like with many aspects of mental health and postgraduate research level study, it's not a clear cut as it may appear at first glance. One respondent commented that their paid employment had a positive and negative impact and that time management was the key area to develop.

*"Working has been both a blessing and a curse. I enjoy that it offers me an alternative to my studies, and prevents me from getting too bogged down in the PhD, but it has certainly inhibited my ability to work consistently and effectively on my own research"*

This was also true of work as an Associate Tutor which one respondent stated was:

*"[...] detrimental. Preparation time was not adequately remunerated and there was no support or guidance from school."*

And another saying:

*"It took up a large chunk of my time, and I was left with a little time to do the course work. I got self-esteem and purpose and a sense of competence from working when my course and tutors robbed me of those things."*

The balance between paid employment and funding are of course intrinsically linked, this was highlighted by a number of respondents commenting on the pressure they are under due to financial constraints:

*"There is immense time pressure on you due to funding. It is very difficult to complete it in three years if you have any other commitments and asking people to work for free in the fourth year isn't an option for many people."*

The act of balancing between necessary paid-employment and being in a position to complete their studies is commonly played out in the minds of PGR students with one respondent commenting that in their experience:

*"[...] financial circumstances are likely to be significant influences upon feelings of wellbeing."*

## **Recommendations**

- 1) To ensure consideration is given, as part of the ongoing review of PGR employment, to the impact of teaching responsibilities on mental health and wellbeing. In particular, to ensure that teaching workload is structured appropriately and students are supported to managing time for those commitments.
- 2) There should be more recognition of the increased pressure to accumulate additional experience and employability skills alongside studies. This should be reflected within workload models, to allow students to develop in this area without it being detrimental to their PGR study.

## Support Services

The survey indicated that a large proportion of PGR students are not aware of aspects of available support services, with the Students' Union scoring particularly low. Many of the comments also indicated that even when students are aware of support available, it is difficult to access them or that staff do not have sufficient knowledge or ability to empathise with the experience of being a PGR student. Worryingly, 28% of respondents were unaware of the SU advice function, and a further 17% had heard of the Dean of Students' Office but stated they would not know how to access it.

In responses it was clear that PGR students recognised the critical importance of a range of support services at UEA. One respondent stated that:

*"Support service (counselling) is extremely important to get stuff off your chest and to get some useful (and most importantly independent) advice."*

Respondents also seemed to identify the importance of early interventions and preventative mental health support as well as counselling and other, more intensive support methods.

*"[...] provisions must be made to support all students continuously throughout their period of study. Post grads should have more mental health support and they should be made aware of the services available when they begin their studies, rather than when the situation is already bad and they need help."*

Students respondents were aware that and had experience of lack of training for "frontline" staff. One noted that:

*"I have found that administrative staff are ill-informed and under-trained in mental health issues. When I initially raised my own challenges with them they were really unhelpful."*

As for the pastoral care role offered within schools through PGR directors, 27% of students stated that they were unaware of support available, with 19% being aware but not knowing how to access it. One respondent appear to question the suitability of that role in certain cases:

*"My 'confidential' conversation with the PGR director about this tenuous arrangement ended up not being very confidential as both supervisors were approached, despite my requesting confidentiality. It has resulted in my feeling vulnerable and not having anyone to talk to about my concerns."*

Students report ongoing concerns around the wait times for counselling appointments in the Dean of Students. There have been reports of students being referred out of the Dean of Students Office to inappropriate alternatives such as the multi-faith centre due to the workload of appropriate support. Respondents were aware of the pressure on services at UEA, but felt more could be done to ensure students acquire an adequate-level of support:

*"I was told that while there were such services, they were heavily oversubscribed and if I wanted such support, I should apply for Disabled Students Allowance and they could do much more for me."*

**Recommendations:**

- 1) For the university to conduct a review into its provision for mental health and wellbeing support for PGR students. Particular focus should be given to the provision of pastoral care within schools, and on the portfolio of support offered through the Dean of Students' Office.
- 2) For the university to commit to developing a comprehensive mental health strategy, and ensure a particular focus on PGR mental health and wellbeing. This should include a strategy for investment in early intervention/preventive care for PGR students, considering best practice from across the sector.

# Summary of recommendations

## Community recommendations

- 1) There should be a recognition of the importance of support networks and communities at all levels: at school, faculty, and institutional level, and to ensure that each level of support is resourced adequately. The SU should be recognised as a key partner in the facilitating of a PGR community and supported accordingly, in particular in developing the new Graduate Centre into being a 'central hub' for the PGR student community.
- 2) Special attention should be paid to groups of students who may find it more challenging to integrate into the academic communities. Where necessary additional resource should be identified to support the integration of international students, student parents, part-time students and those who learn at distance.

## Expectation recommendations

- 3) To consider how primary supervisors provide pastoral care, and to ensure that all academic and administrative staff expected to deliver that support are trained to the appropriate level.
- 4) To ensure that the development of skills to enable students to manage their own expectations of workload and capacity is properly integrated as core aspects of the research training framework, and is considered in the Doctoral Training Working Group. Particular consideration should be given to building upon and expanding the support offered in developing those skills through the Learning Enhancement Team.

## Work/Life balance recommendations

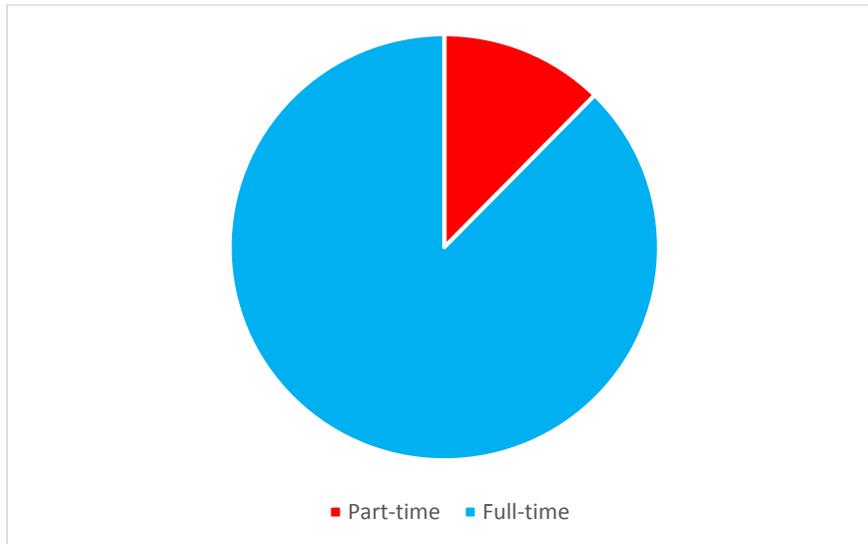
- 5) To ensure consideration is given, as part of the ongoing review of PGR employment, to the impact of teaching responsibilities on mental health and wellbeing. In particular, to ensure that teaching workload is structured appropriately and students are supported to managing time for those commitments.
- 6) There should be more recognition of the increased pressure to accumulate additional experience and employability skills alongside studies. This should be reflected within workload models, to allow students to develop in this area without it being detrimental to their PGR study.

## Support services recommendations:

- 7) For the university to conduct a review into its provision for mental health and wellbeing support for PGR students. Particular focus should be given to the provision of pastoral care within schools, and on the portfolio of support offered through the Dean of Students' Office.
- 8) For the university to commit to developing a comprehensive mental health strategy, and ensure a particular focus on PGR mental health and wellbeing. This should include a strategy for investment in early intervention/preventive care for PGR students, considering best practice from across the sector.

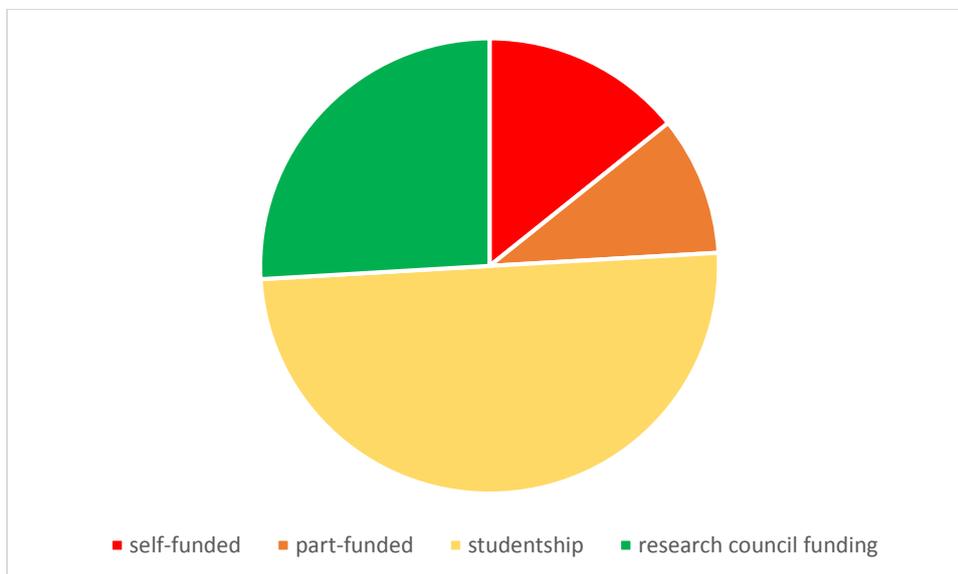
# **'The Honesty Project' Appendix A – initial findings**

### Q. 1 – Are you on a part-time or full-time course?



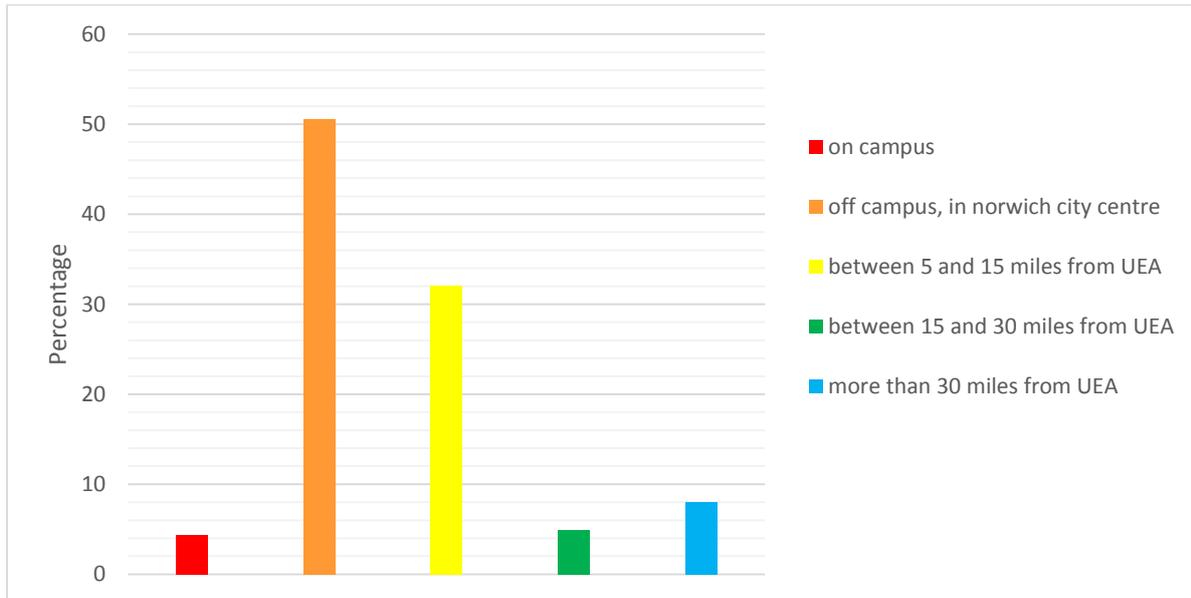
The majority of students who took the survey stated that they were on a full time course. Although this is the more common option for PGR students, there *are* still part-time postgraduate students with possibly different needs to full-time students. This should be considered.

### Q.2 – How was your course funded?



It is interesting to note that only just under 15% of respondents study through self-funding, meaning that around 85% have financial help from scholarship or bursaries. There may well be different expectations and opinions of students based on how much of their own finances are funding their degree, and different stress levels related to finance issues.

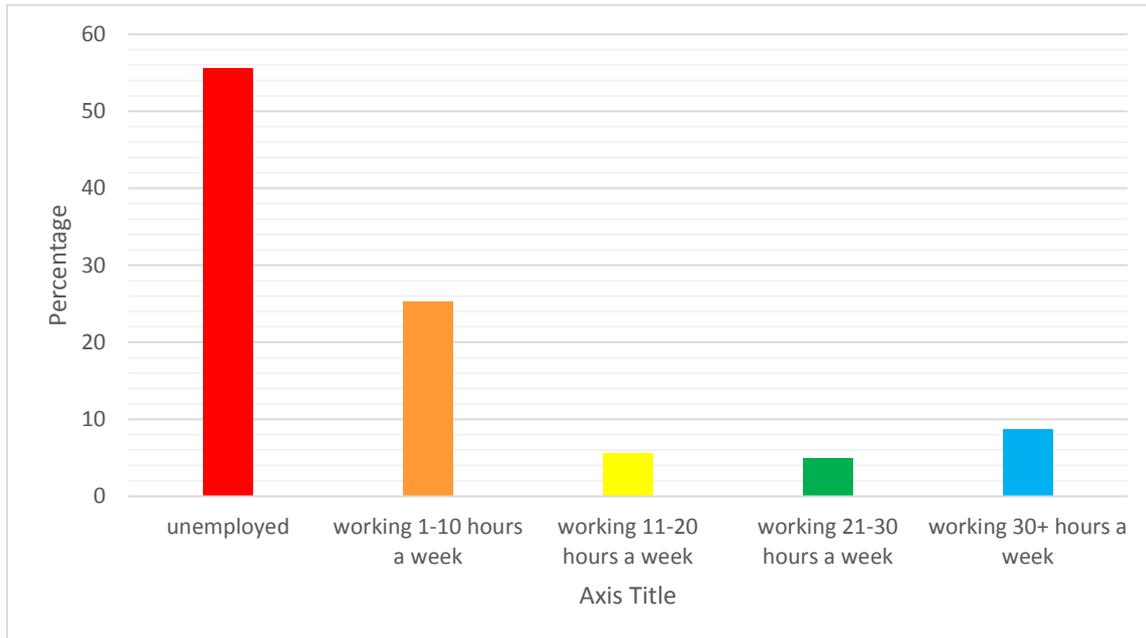
### Q. 3 – where have you lived whilst studying?



Most respondents, around 83%, stated that they live within 15 miles from UEA campus. UEA should be making the most of this in terms of extra-curricular or Norwich-based post-graduate activities for students to partake in outside of their studies.

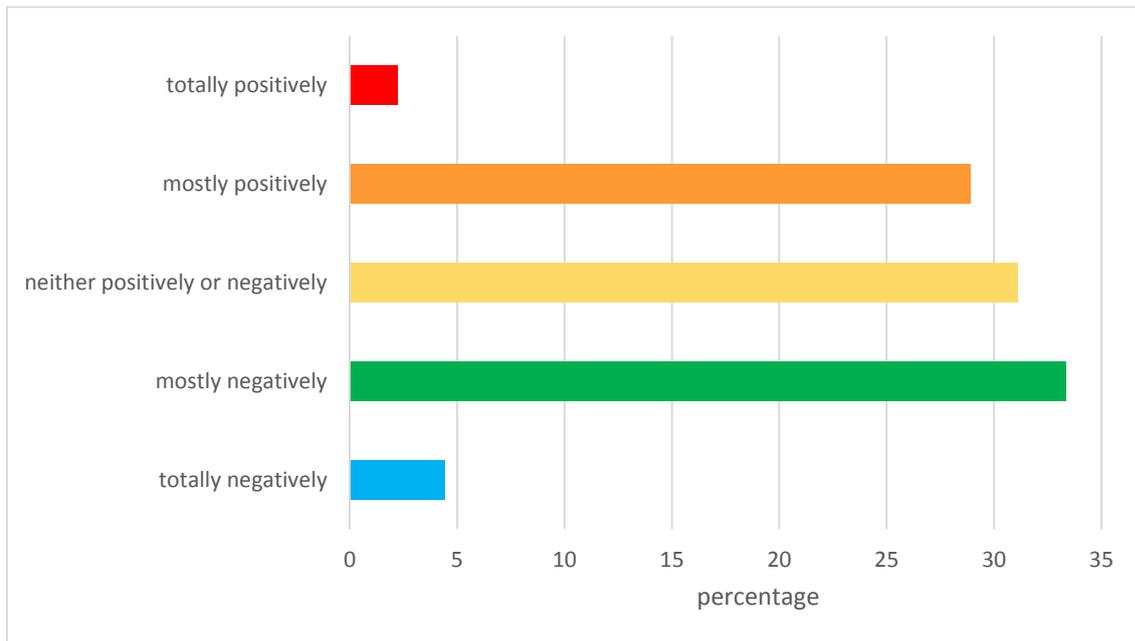
Even though PGR projects do not involve as many contact hours as PGT or Undergraduate studies, it was a surprise to see that nearly 10% live more than 30 miles away from UEA. This could introduce issues of potential isolation or extra stress with having to travel a long distance or being unable to easily drop into campus.

**Q. 4 – Please describe your employment status whilst studying.**



55% of respondents stated that they have not been working whilst studying, which could contribute to wellbeing issues around worrying about money and financing their studies. Of those who have had a job whilst studying, 26% work 1-10 hours a week, and around 12% work between 11 and 30 hours a week. 8% of respondents stated that they hold a full-time job alongside their studies. Although this data does not indicate whether this is predominantly students on a part-time course, it is still incredibly relevant to know. Even on a part-time course, to be working full-time alongside would mean a very full working week with potential difficulties in balancing paid work and study.

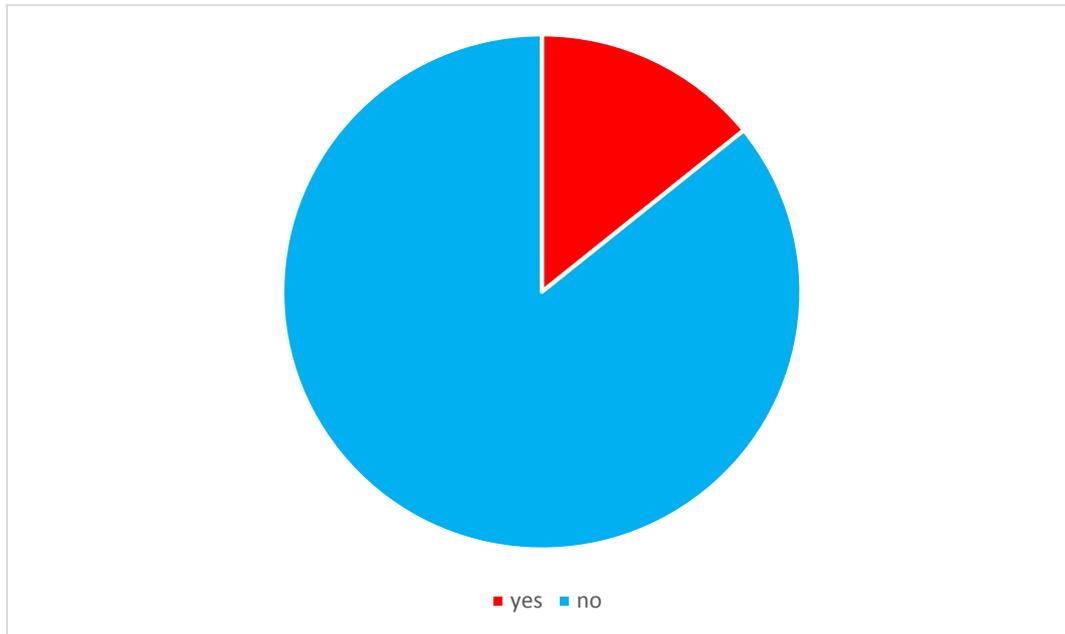
### Q. 5 – If you had a job whilst studying, how did it impact on your wellbeing?



Although only by 2%, the response which received the most answers was “mostly negatively” – around a third of respondents answered with this response. This indicates that this proportion of students are probably working whilst studying to sustain themselves financially rather than as a fulfilling aspect of their lives, and / or are finding the work-study balance difficult.

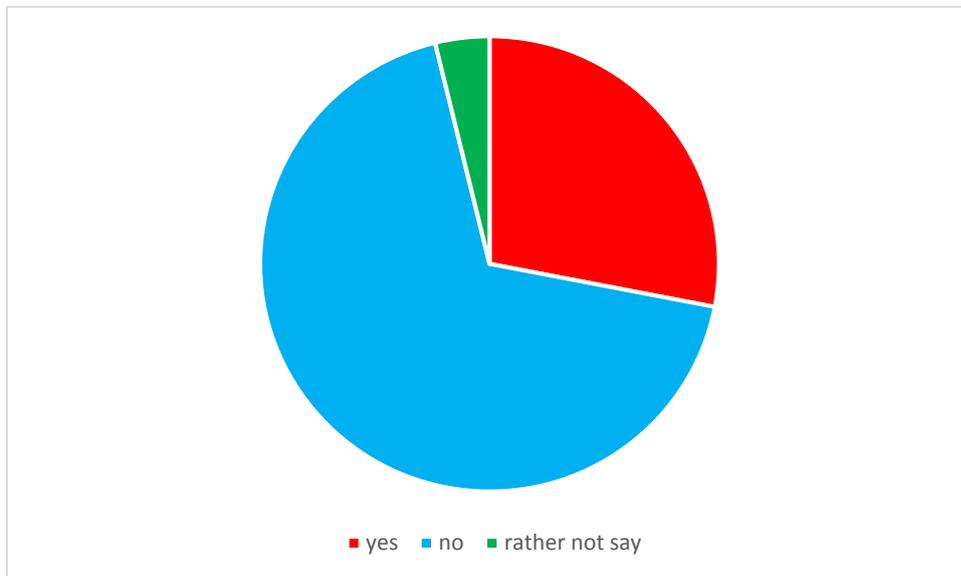
This said, 28% of students with a job said that it impacted mostly positively on their wellbeing indicating that in some cases a job can be a good supplement to studying, perhaps as an escape or to help influence studies.

## Q.6 – Have you had a caring responsibility whilst studying?



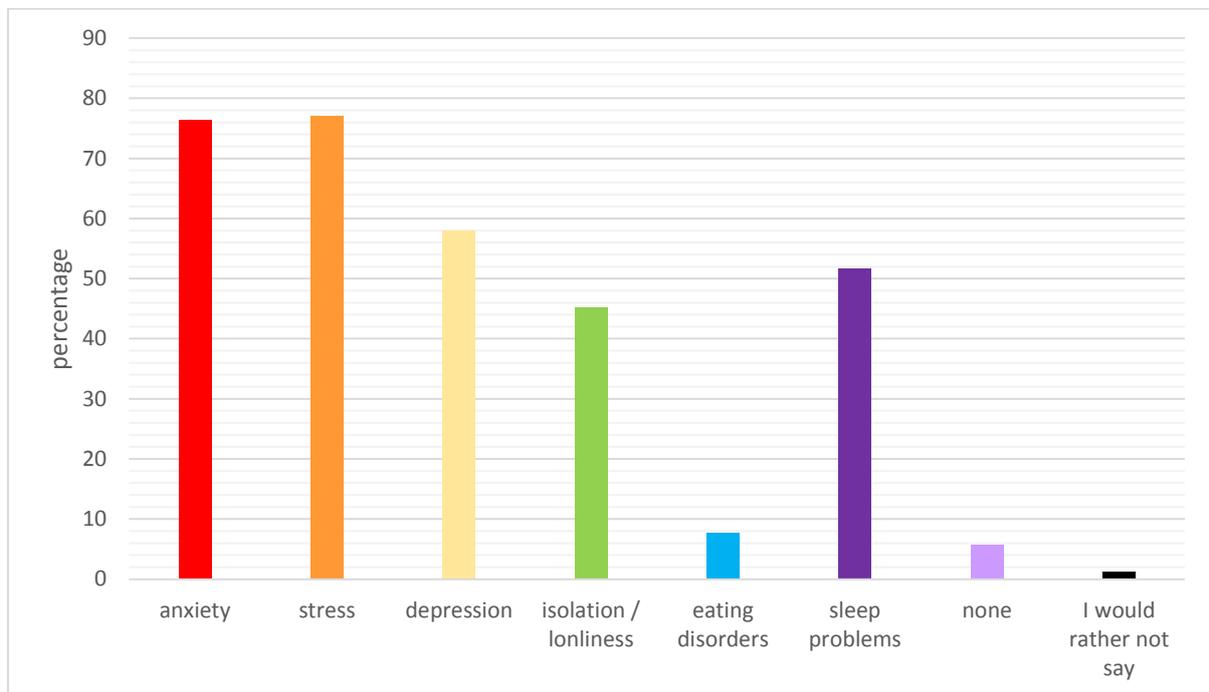
Around 15% of respondents declared that they had some kind of caring responsibility. Although this is a minority figure, it still indicates that there are a significant group of students who have specific needs, for instance in terms of childcare provision. Currently, the University has a childcare centre on campus; perhaps this needs more provisions and better promotion to ensure that all students who may need the facility could use it.

**Q. 7 – Did you have any pre-existing mental health issues before starting your studies?**



28% of respondents declared that they had a pre-existing mental health issue before coming to University. This indicates that over a quarter of PGR students may have come to University needing extra support and, given the high proportion of mental health issues faced by PGR students (as highlighted in question 8), their studies may have impacted negatively on their wellbeing. This figure only indicates those who chose to disclose, so the actual figure could be higher.

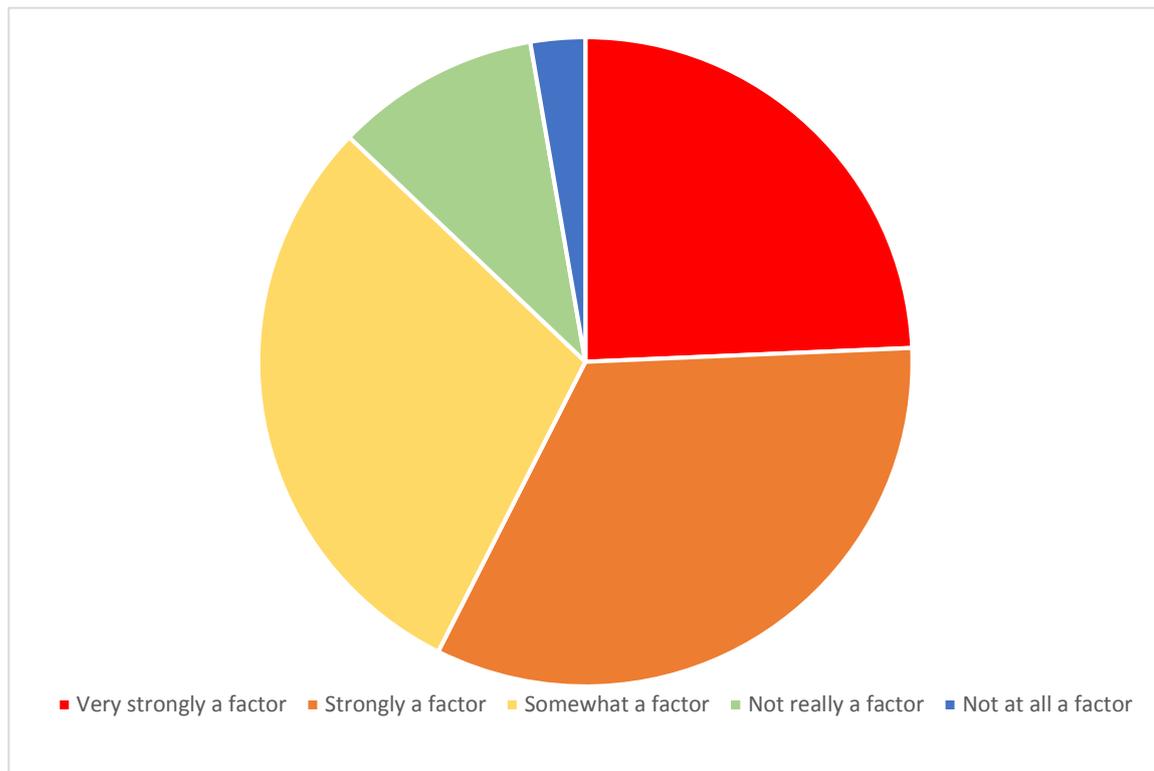
## Q. 8 – Have you suffered from any of the following whilst studying?



This was a question whereby respondents could choose as many answers as were appropriate to them, hence the results not totalling 100%. The results to this question proved somewhat worrying. 76% of respondents declared suffering with anxiety, 77% having suffered with stress, 58% with depression and 52% with sleep problems. One particularly surprising result was nearly 46% of students disclosing that they felt isolated and/or lonely during their time of study. Some of the comments later in this survey help to explain better why and how these students may have felt isolated.

Although this question does not ask whether these issues were formally diagnosed or a self-diagnosis, the high proportion of PGR students facing at least one type of mental health issue indicates a poor level of welfare supervision and support among the PGR courses. The fact that only 6% of students said that they had not suffered with any mental health issues whilst studying indicates that, whether or not they went through formal diagnosis, the majority still noticed a negative impact upon their own wellbeing.

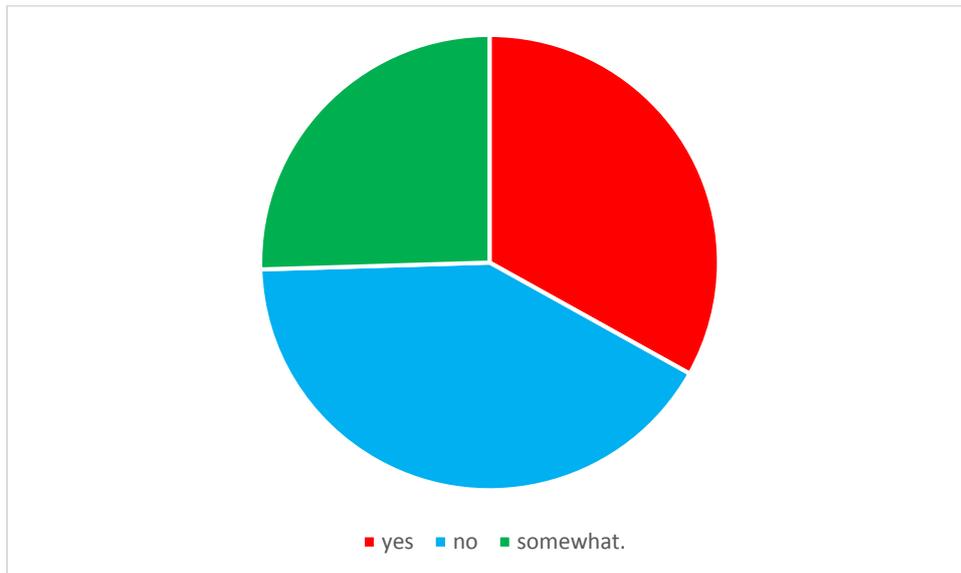
**Q. 9 – If you have experienced any mental health issues, to what extent would you say your studies were a contributing factor?**



39 respondents chose to comment on their experiences. Of these...

- 5 respondents said that their mental health issues were a result of personal and / or **pre-existing issues**.
- 13 said that their **studies** played a key part in struggling with mental health issues over their course, with key issues being depression, anxiety and stress.
- 5 indicated that they had experienced a **lack of personal support**.
- 9 indicated a **lack of academic support** had contributed to the worsening of their mental health.
- 10 spoke specifically about the effects of **isolation** and how they had found their studying to be a very lonely process which had contributed to poor mental health.
- 8 said that a main cause of stress and / or worry was **finances**.

**Q. 10 - Have you ever felt pressured to do more or take on responsibilities that you have not felt comfortable with, which may have contributed negatively to your wellbeing?**



27 respondents chose to comment on their experiences. Of these...

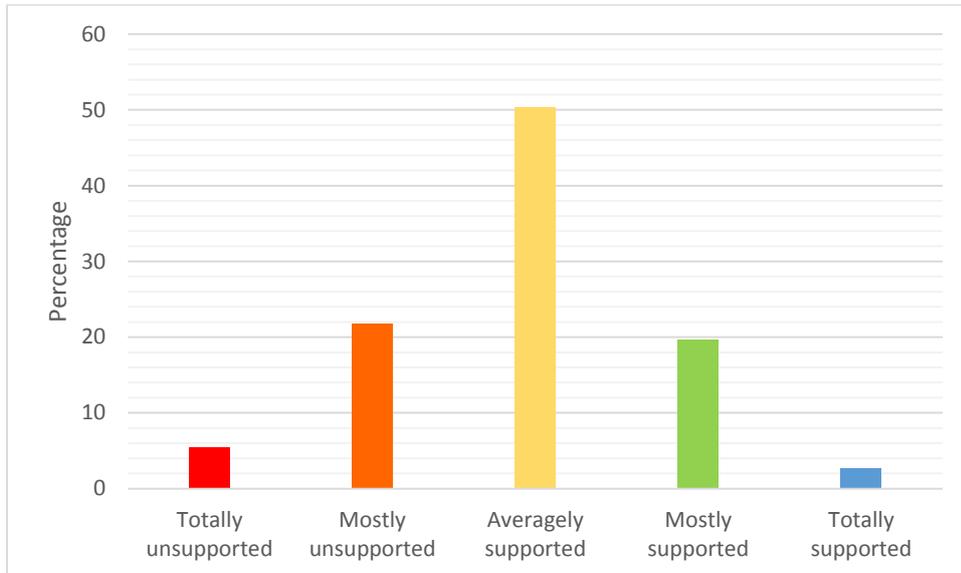
- 7 said that this pressure was as a result of expectations of their supervisors.
- 6 alluded to the fact that they were asked to teach, which added pressure.
- 6 felt that they were pressured to do extra or too much work.
- 10 indicated that they put pressure on themselves to say yes and take on extra work.

**Q. 11 – please share any other experiences below that you feel may be relevant**

24 responses

- 6 alluded to issues with supervisors
- 3 alluded to feelings of isolation
- 4 indicated that extra work had added to stress levels.
- 4 spoke about their own mental health
- 7 alluded to lack of support
- 2 mentioned issues with other staff members
- 3 spoke of issues as an international student.

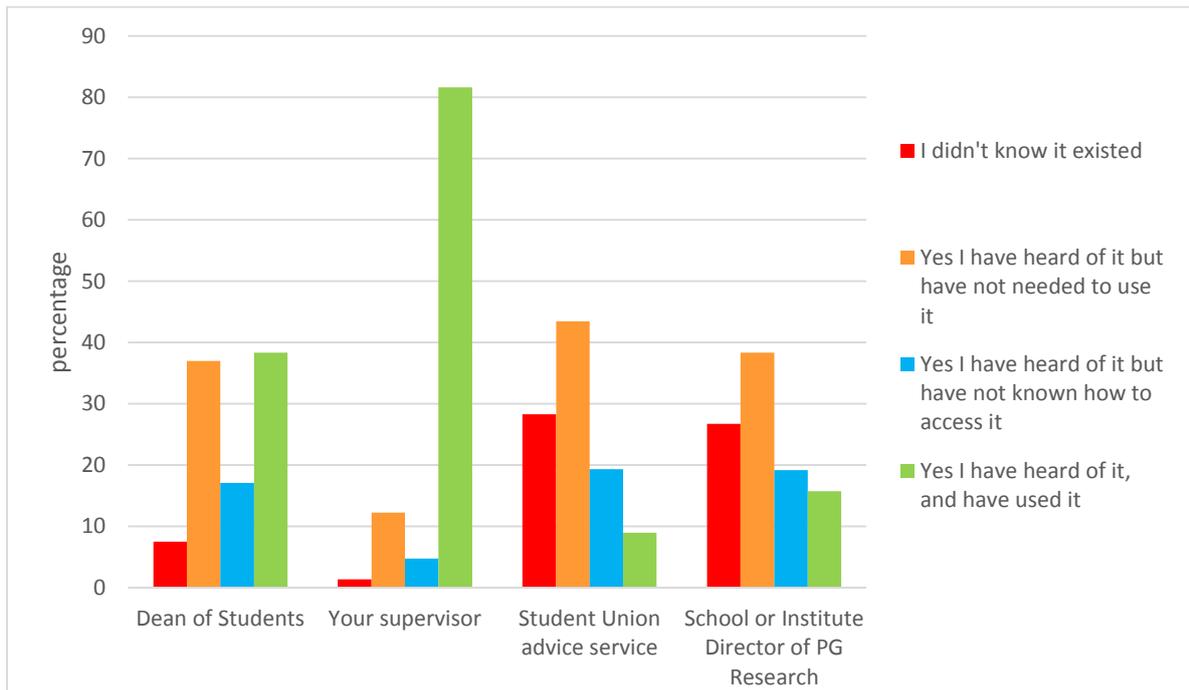
## Q. 12 – How well supported have you felt over your time at UEA?



35 respondents chose to add a comment to support their answer. Of these...

- 13 mentioned their supervisor positively
- 2 mentioned PGR office positively
- 3 mentioned DoS positively
- 3 mentioned their supervisor negatively
- 4 mentioned the PGR office negatively
- 4 mentioned DoS negatively
- 9 inferred that they did not know the support available and / or felt unable to ask for help
- 5 indicated an overall negative experience of support at UEA.

### Q.13 – Are you aware of the following sources of support available at UEA?



This graph indicates that there are varying levels of awareness and use of the different support services available.

Generally, there is a high awareness and usage of supervisors as sources of support, with 82% of students having used their supervisor and 12% knowing how to access them but not needing to contact them.

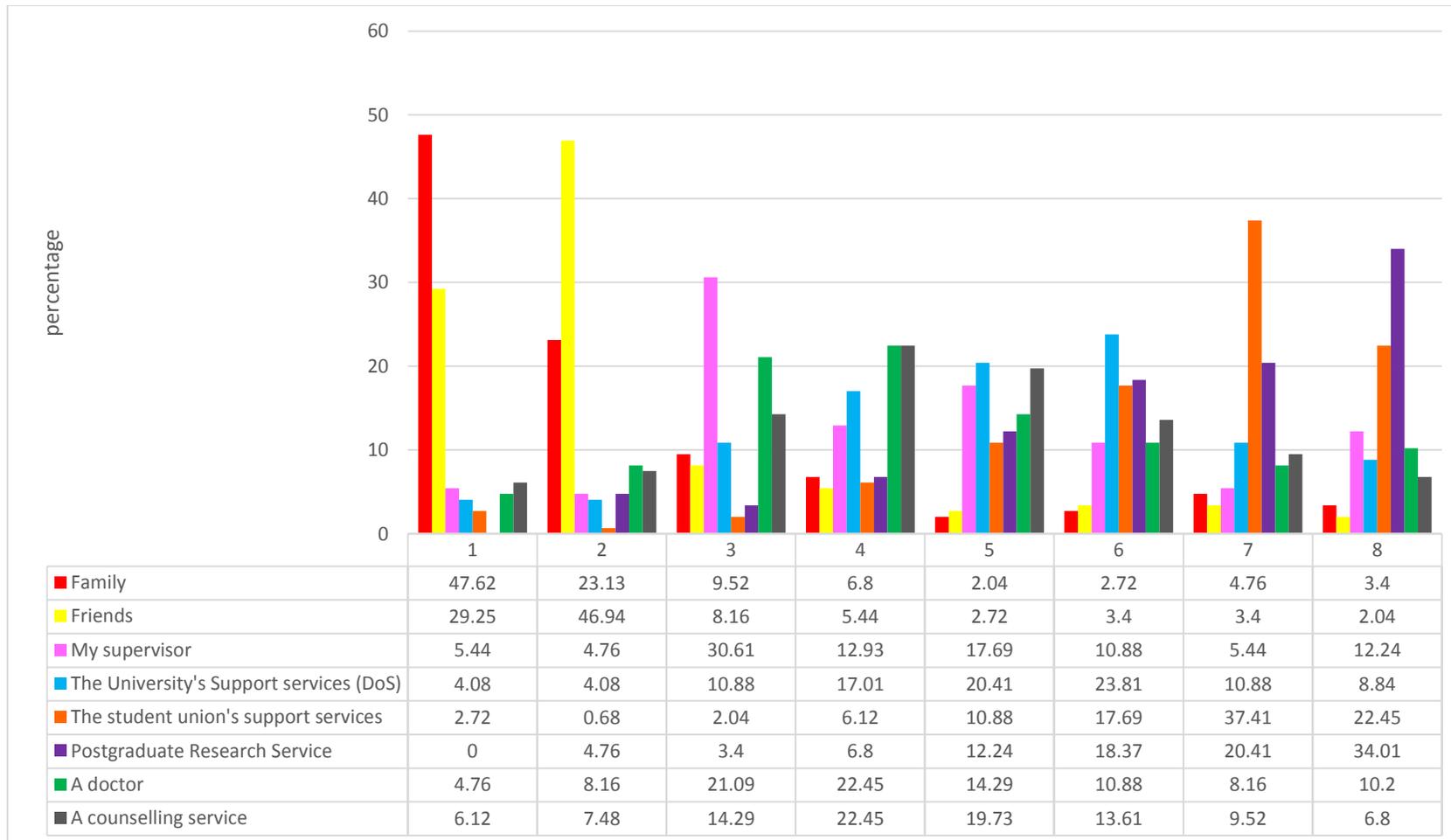
Dean of Students received mixed levels of usage and awareness. 8% reported having not known it existed, and 18% said that they did not know how to access Dean of Students.

Nearly 30% of respondents did not know the Students' Union advice service exists, and just under 20% did not know how to access the service. Combined, this is close to 50% of respondents who have not been able to use the Students' Union advice centre who may have benefited from using it.

Knowledge of the School or Institute Director of PG Research is similar to that of the Students' Union advice centre, with 26% of students not knowing it existed and just under 20% not knowing how to access it.

This indicates that all support networks and avenues could be better promoted to PGT students, both in terms of the service itself but also in terms of what each service can offer. Having better knowledge of the different support services available could be of huge benefit to PGT students, whether they have existing mental health issues or develop any over their studies.

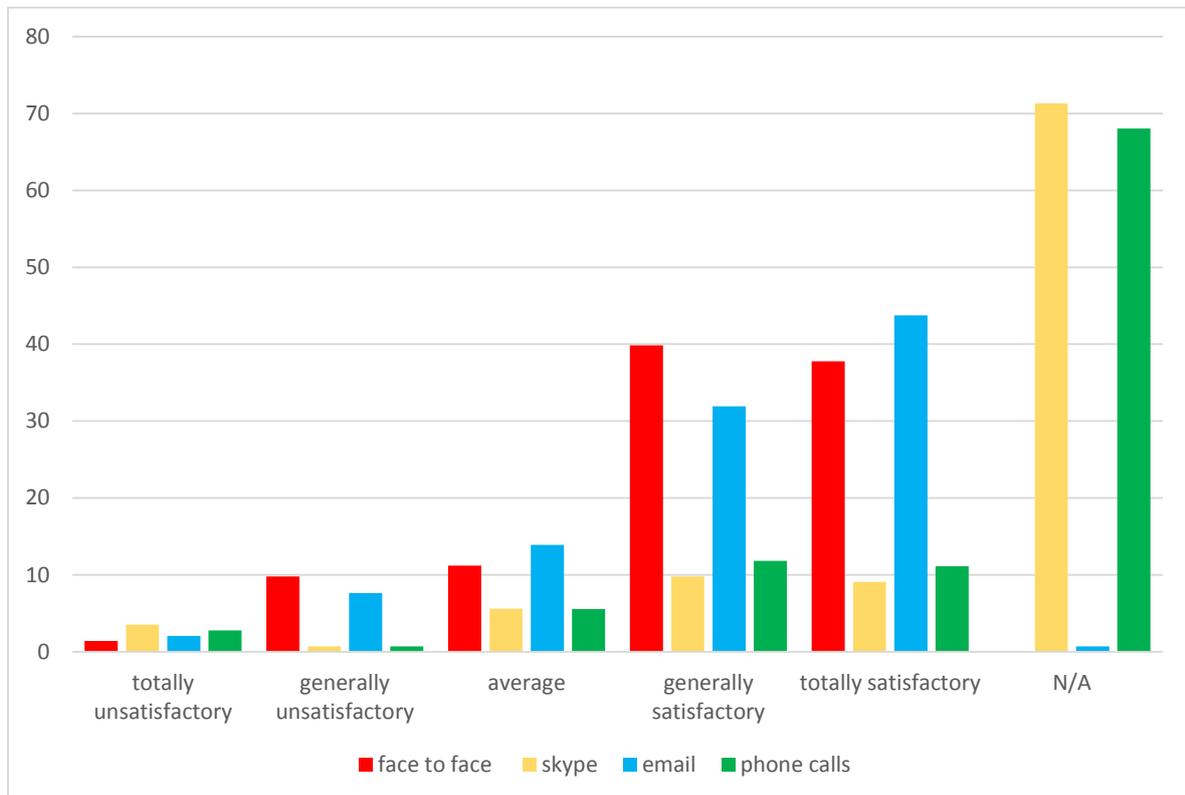
Q.14: Please rank the order in which you would prioritise the following options for getting well-being support (1 being most likely, 7 being least likely)



Q.14 (on the previous page) was included to indicate the main sources of support that PGR students turn to. Generally, and as expected, family and friends were the 2 avenues of support that the majority of respondents would be most likely to prioritise when in need of well-being support. 'My supervisor' and 'a doctor' were ranked generally as 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> ports of call. The services that students were less likely to prioritise were the PGR service, Students' Union support service and the University's support services. This indicates that students seem reluctant to seek help on campus and, if they do, they are more likely to go to their supervisor than a departmental service.

This could be because they feel there may be a conflict of interest and that they could not complain to or seek advice from University services. There could be issues with University support services not being promoted well enough, with students choosing to not turn to them as they are not aware of the support that could be provided.

Q.15 - How would you rate the frequency of the interactions you have had with your supervisor over your time studying?



This indicates that, generally, the main way in which PGR students have contact with their supervisors are face-to-face or email, with 72% and 68% respectively saying that skype and phone call contact was not applicable to them.

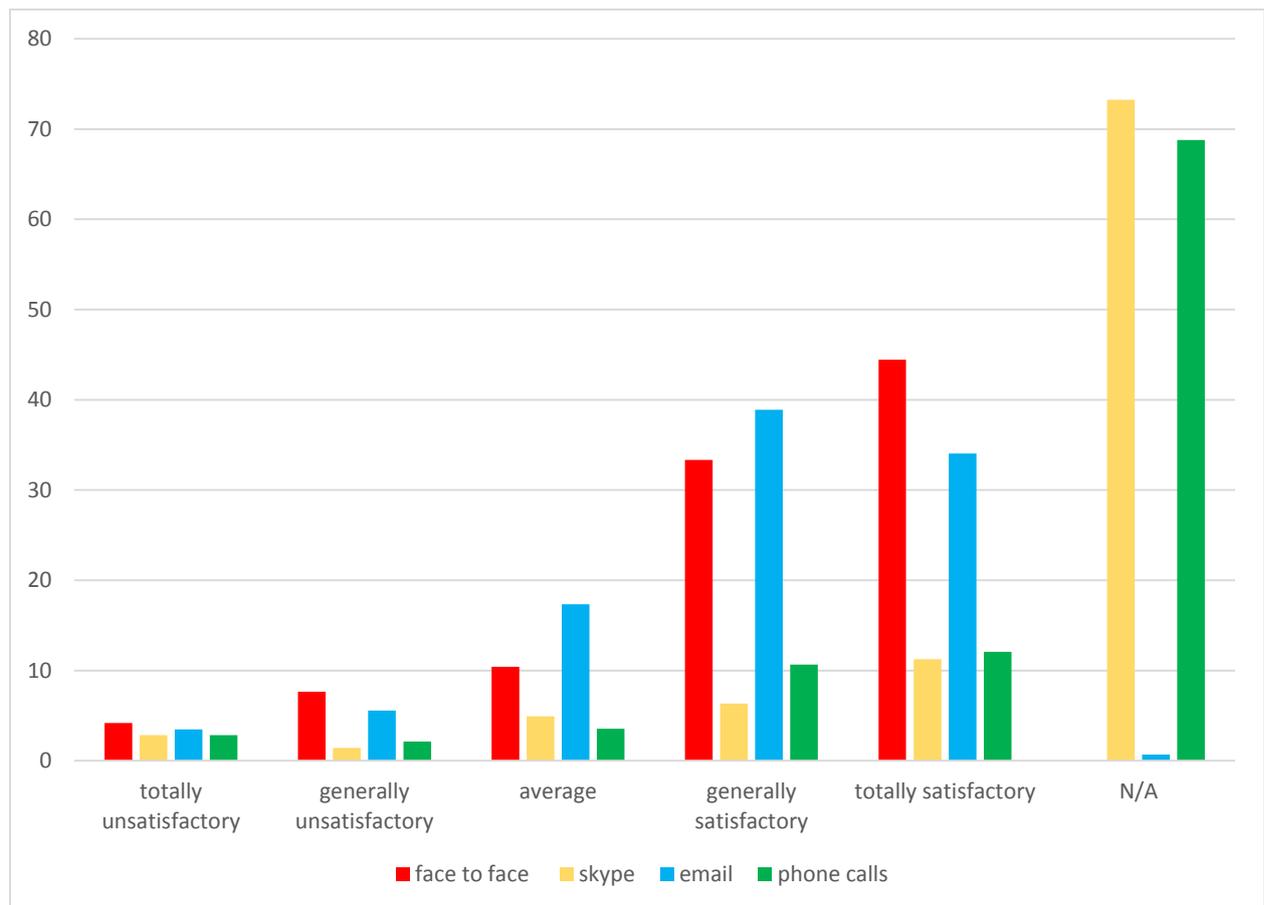
Overall, most of the frequency of interactions with supervisors was seen as being generally or totally satisfactory. However, there are a few worrying areas, particularly with frequency of face-to-face contact:

- 12% rated the frequency of face-to-face interactions as 'average'
- 10% rated the frequency of face-to-face interactions as 'generally unsatisfactory'

This means that nearly a quarter of respondents were did not find the frequency of face-to-face interactions with their supervisors satisfactory. Perhaps more needs to be done to clarify the role of the supervisor in terms of how often they should be meeting with students and of the

importance of offering face-to-face meetings, not just emailed advice.

Q.16 - How would you rate the quality of the interactions you have had with your supervisor over your time studying?



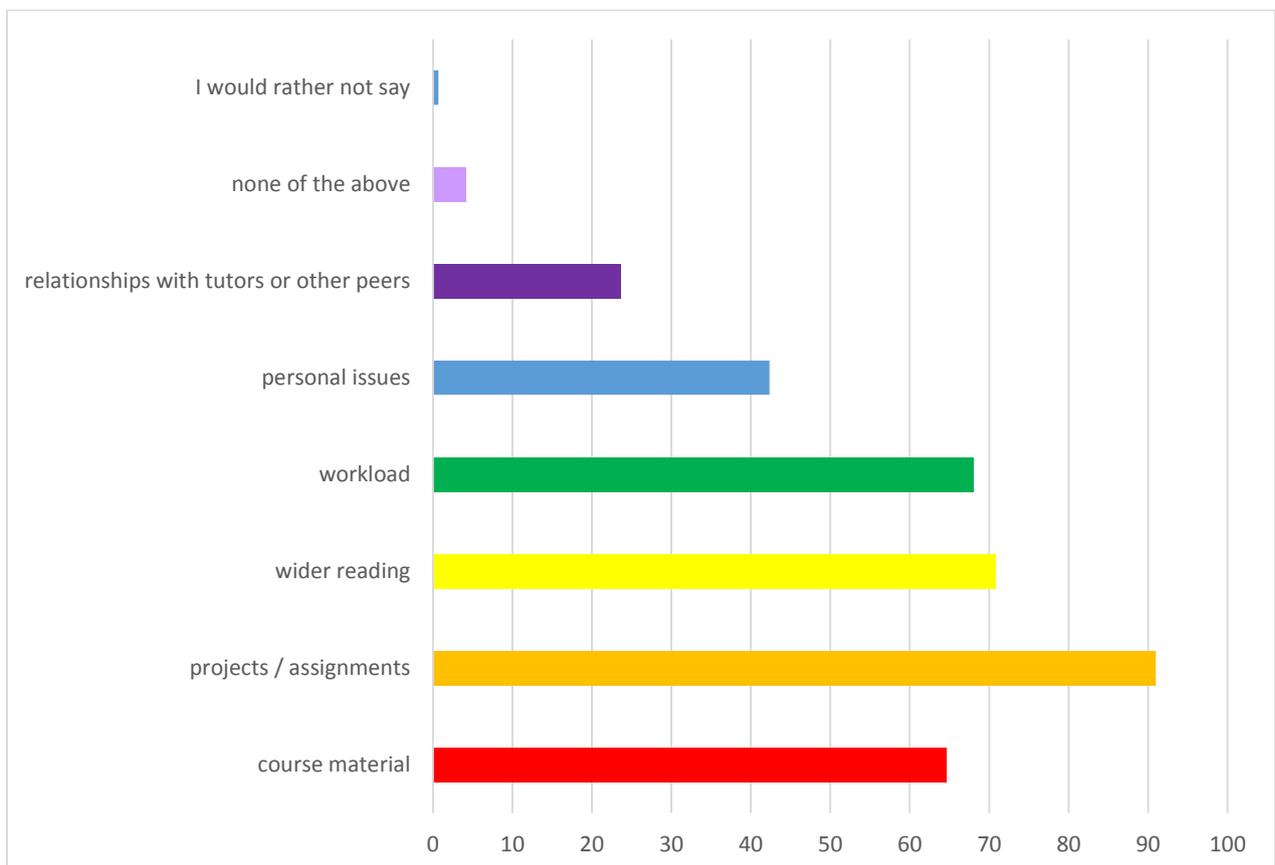
A combination of around 80% of respondents were either generally or totally satisfied with the quality of face-to-face interaction with their supervisors, and around 75% were satisfied with the quality of email interactions. A high proportion said that skype and phone call interactions were not applicable, 73% and 68% respectively. However, of those who did use skype and phone calls, less than 5% found them to be of generally or totally unsatisfactory quality.

Interestingly, nearly 20% of respondents only found email interaction of average quality, and just over 10% thought the same of face-to-face interactions.

However, these results are generally positive, indicating that the majority

of respondents have been happy with the quality of the interactions with their supervisors.

Q. 17 - Which of the following issues have you discussed with your supervisor?



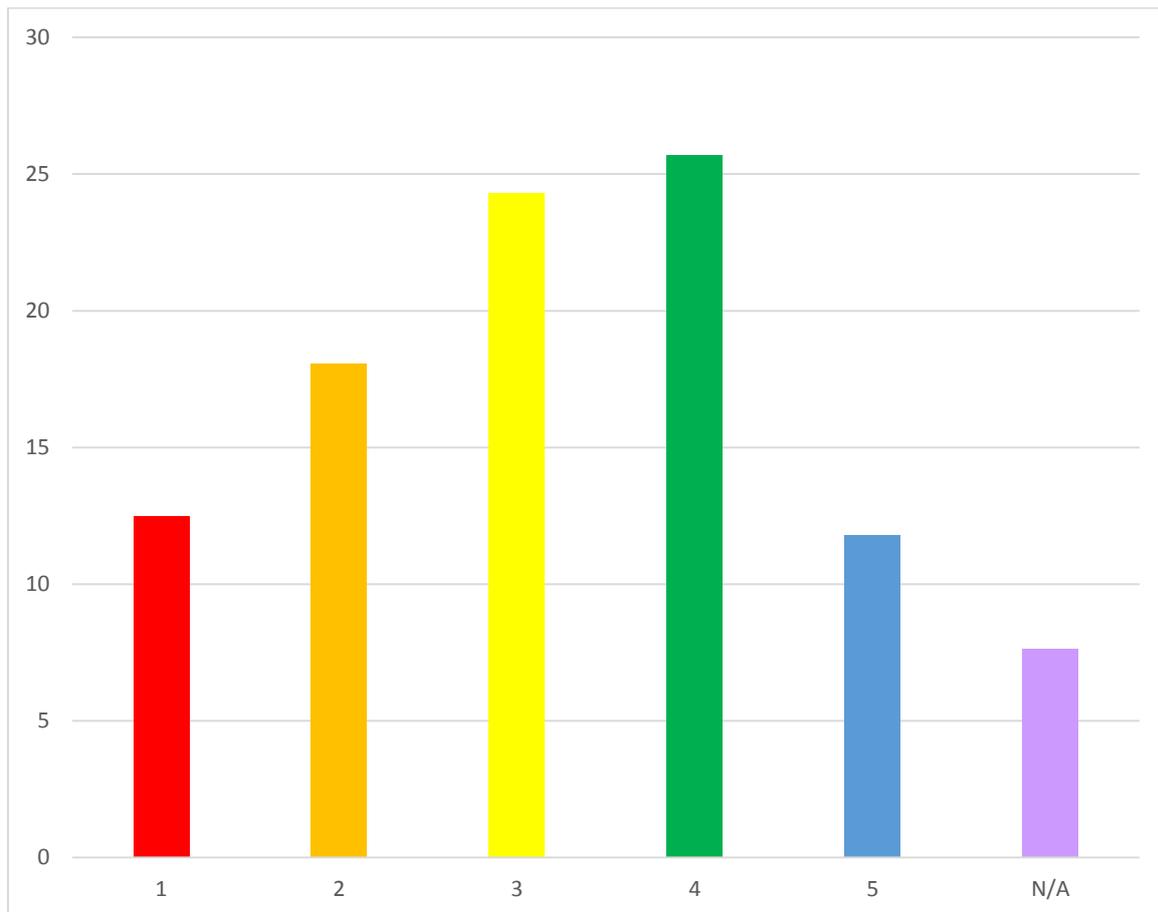
This question was designed to indicate the types of issues that supervisors are advising students on. Not surprisingly, over 90% of respondents said they discussed projects / assignments, followed by wider reading at just over 70%, then workload at 68% and course material at 65%.

However, it is surprising that over 40% of respondents stated that they spoke to their supervisors about personal issues and just under a quarter spoke about relationships with peers. This indicates that the role of a supervisor is very broad depending on the kind of information that their students are willing or feel able to discuss.

It is also interesting that around 5% of respondents answered with "none of the above". If this question was asked again it would be worth having

an option of “I have never seen my supervisor”, This would break “none of the above” into 2 options of those who *have* seen their supervisor but just not spoken about any of the other categories, and those who have not seen their supervisor at all.

Q. 18 How would you rate the helpfulness of your tutor in regards to your wellbeing? (1 being not helpful at all, and 5 being extremely helpful)



The range of answers given here is huge. Almost exactly the same percentage of students feel that their supervisor has been “not helpful at all” (1) as those who felt they were “extremely helpful” (5). This indicates that satisfaction with supervisors varies enormously and is something that may need to be investigated separately.

Linking back to the findings of questions 17, it would be interested to explore why 8% answered “N/A” – is this because they have not seen their tutor, or because they did not feel they had wellbeing-specific issues to talk about?

It is, however, reassuring to see that the highest proportion of respondents, just over a quarter, felt their supervisor was helpful (option 4).

**Q. 19 – what advice would you give to yourself if you were to do your studies again? (131 responses)**

- 20 were totally negative; either stating to not do a PhD, or stating to not study at UEA.
- 13 mentioned mental health, either in terms of insuring you are in a stable place before starting, or seeking help sooner if you feel your mental health has deteriorated.
- 23 alluded to organisation being hugely important, both before starting and during the course.
- 24 spoke of the importance of having secure support networks, both internally (supervisors, fellow PhD students, Dean of Students etc.) and externally (friends, family, doctor etc.)
- 8 mentioned UEA-specific problems, all of them indicating that they should not have chosen or would not choose UEA to study at again.
- 9 specifically said that their advice to themselves would be to not study a PhD.
- 7 made reference to the difficulties of being an international student.
- 15 mentioned supervisors, both in terms of making sure that communication is good and in terms of getting extra support if your supervisor is not helpful.
- 10 mentioned finances, in terms of ensuring that you are in a financially stable position before undertaking a PhD.

## Summary...

The results of the initial survey indicate many very worrying areas surrounding mental health and wellbeing of PGR students, and the support (or lack of) available. Having analysed both the qualitative and quantitative comments, there are four key areas of concern that the Union will be working on trying to improve:

### - Community

Many PGR students alluded to a lack of community during their studies, and that research work can be extremely isolating. Although Union House now has Scholar's Bar and the Postgraduate Lounge, which we hope will give PGR students the option to work and socialise in a space shared with others in similar circumstances, we will still be working on exploring how more of a community can be established. Although the nature of PGR work is that it is very much independent, this does not mean that the experience should be isolating.

### - Expectations

This area is two-fold. The first area is exploring the expectations of students about their studies. Many students implied that they went into their PGR studies without having been made fully aware of what it would entail and of how they could gain support and guidance when their project is predominantly independent.

The second area that will be explored is what staff expect of their PGR students. Many of the comments in the survey indicated that supervisors' expectations vary hugely and put many students out of their comfort zones. An examples of this that was mentioned several times throughout the survey was the pressure to teach on top of the research aspects of the course, and the comparative lack of guidance that came with this.

### - Work-life balance

As displayed in the results to questions 4 and 6, around 12% of respondents work between 11 and 30 hours a week, and around 15% of respondents have caring responsibilities. Many of the comments in the survey indicated PGR students finding difficulty in balancing their work, study, social and home commitments. This is something that the Union are keen to explore further to provide as much support as possible.

### - Support services

Questions 13 and 14 indicate that a large proportion of PGR students are not aware of some of the support provisions available, particularly the Student's Union. Many of the comments also indicated that even when

students are aware of support systems it is difficult to access them or that staff do not have sufficient knowledge or empathy as to the kind of issues that PGR students are more likely to face. We as a Union will be doing more to raise the profile of our advice service and our PG Education Officer, Liam, among PGR students. We will also be investigating further the issues of PGR dissatisfaction with some of the University's support provisions.