PGR StudentSurvey.ie: Trends in Research Culture

Introduction

This report considers PGR StudentSurvey.ie data for survey questions related to research culture.

These questions, outlined below, have a narrow focus on research students' perspective on the particular department they are working with, covering both programmatic elements, available opportunities to showcase their research, and overall sentiment regarding their research and department. We know from independent analysis of the pilot data of studentsurvey.ie (PGR) that these questions fit together well*, and equivalent analysis of more recent PGR data that we have undertaken supports this, indicating that these four items are measuring the same construct and may be treated as a single scale. We use the same method to develop the single scale scoring as we used for digital capital.

Here are the questions on which research culture scoring was based:

- My department provides access to a relevant seminar programme
- The research ambience in my department stimulates my work
- I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other research students
- I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department

Results

The overall trend in average research culture scores is one we have seen before: a dip at 2021 and then subsequent recovery in 2023. The decline to 2021, from 14.4 to 13.9 average points, was small relative to other measures considered in other reports in this series, while the 2023 mean score (14.6) was above the level of the pre-2021 dip, indicating a full recovery in scoring from that blip.

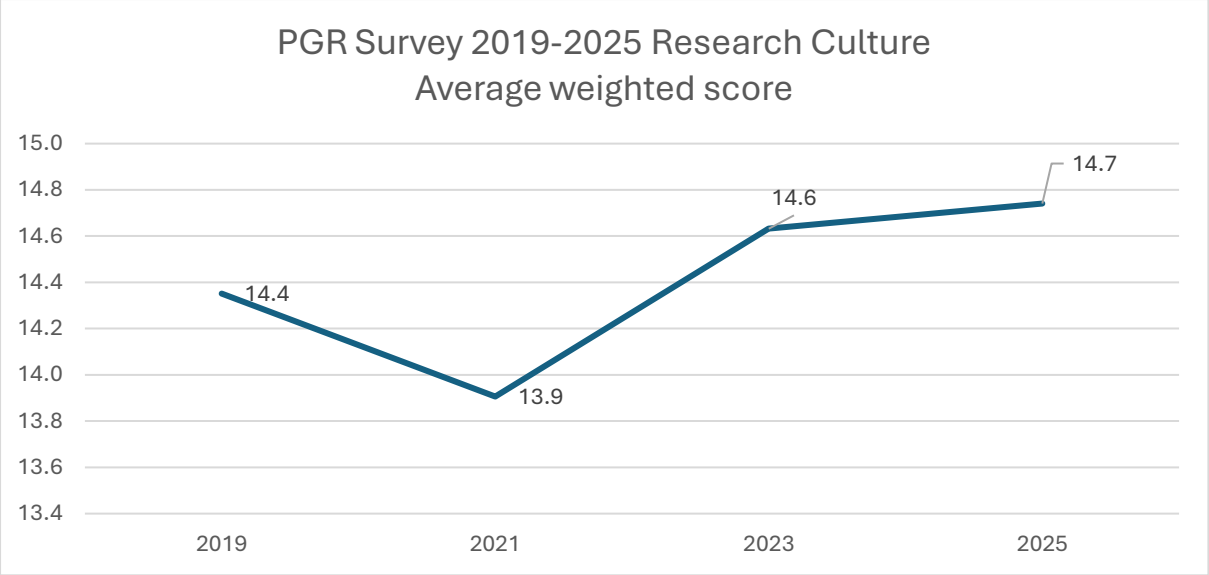

Figure 1. Overall research culture

Gender

The scoring values and trend were quite similar for females and males. However, females declined by slightly more in 2021, and their average scores continued to lag marginally below males in 2023 and 2025. This is likely due to the higher proportion of females studying AHSS fields compared to STEM, and AHSS scores in research culture were marginally lower than those in STEM. 2027 might see a closing of this gap if the trajectories continue.

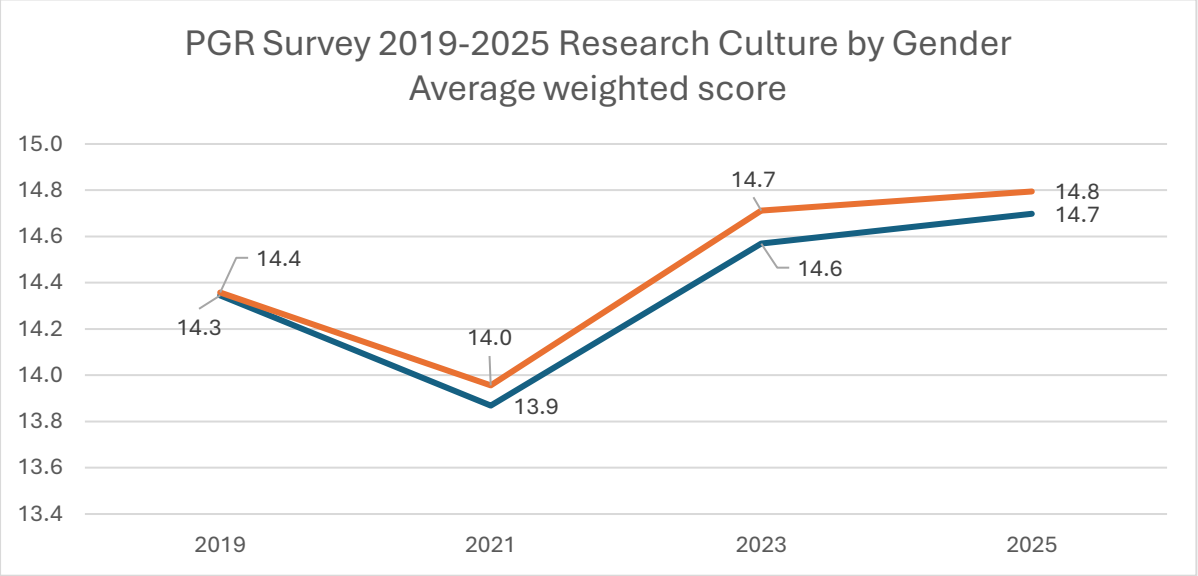

Figure 2. Research culture by gender

Age

Although scores on research culture vary quite dramatically from year to year (with an unsurprising drop in 2021), there appears to also be a relationship with age. Broadly speaking, ratings on research culture are higher for the youngest age group, and lowest for the 40plus age group.

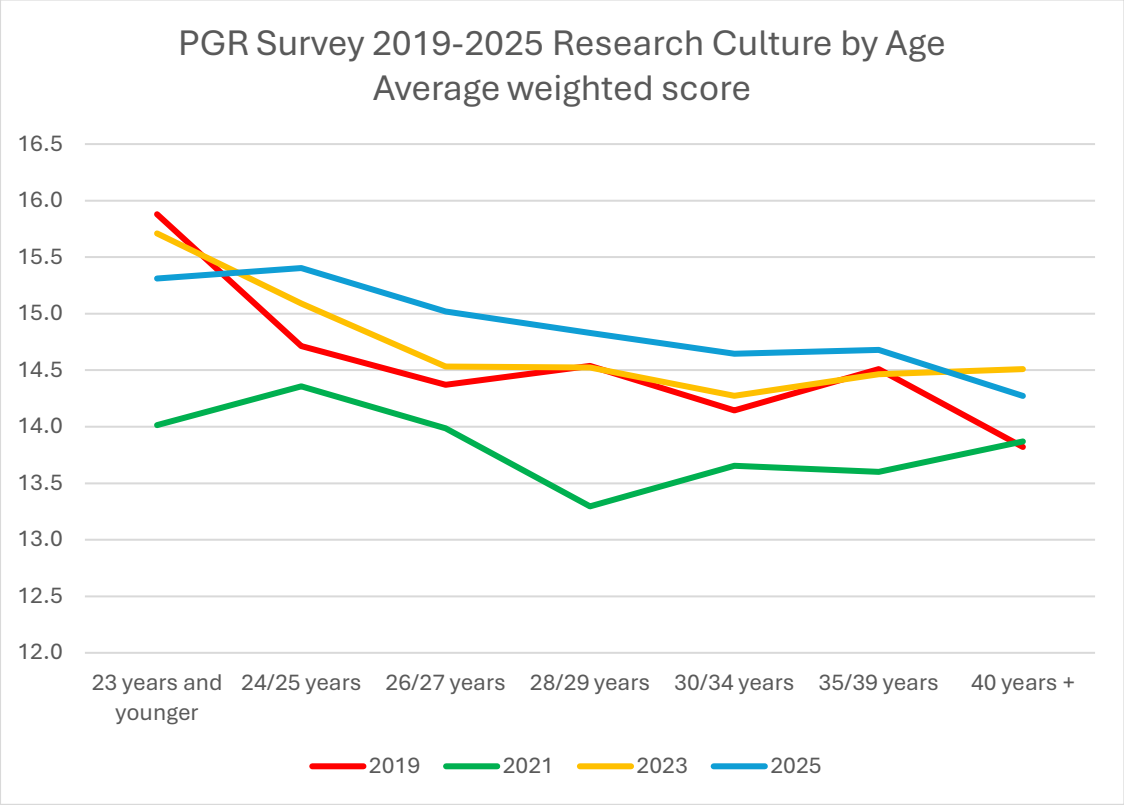

Figure 3. Research culture by age group

Institution type

Technological HE institutions had lower average scoring in research culture than Universities or Other institutions. All three types declined from 2019 to 2021; COVID-19 and the associated restrictions are the most likely explanation for this. Universities bounced back subsequently so that 2025 was their highest average scoring year. For technological HE institutions, recovery was slower and though the score now exceeds its pre-COVID-19 level, it remains one point in mean scoring below universities at the latest survey.

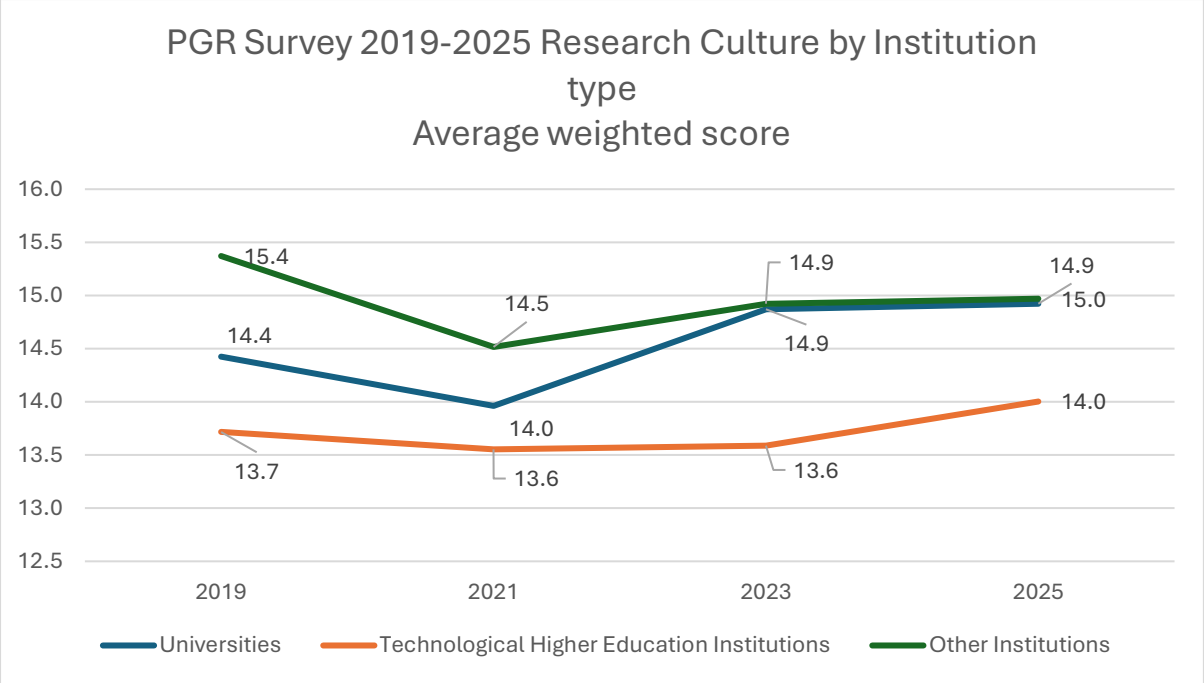

Figure 4. Research culture by institution type

Programme type

Mean scores between 2019 and 2021 went down for master's by Research students by substantially more (1.3 points decline) than PhD students (0.3 points decline). A possible explanation for this was thought to be that COVID-19 restrictions had a bigger detrimental effect on less experienced research students, particularly regarding opportunities to engage with other students and the wider research community. However, Master's students had not yet recovered to their 2019 levels in 2025, while PhD scores continue to climb – so it seems other factors may also be in play.

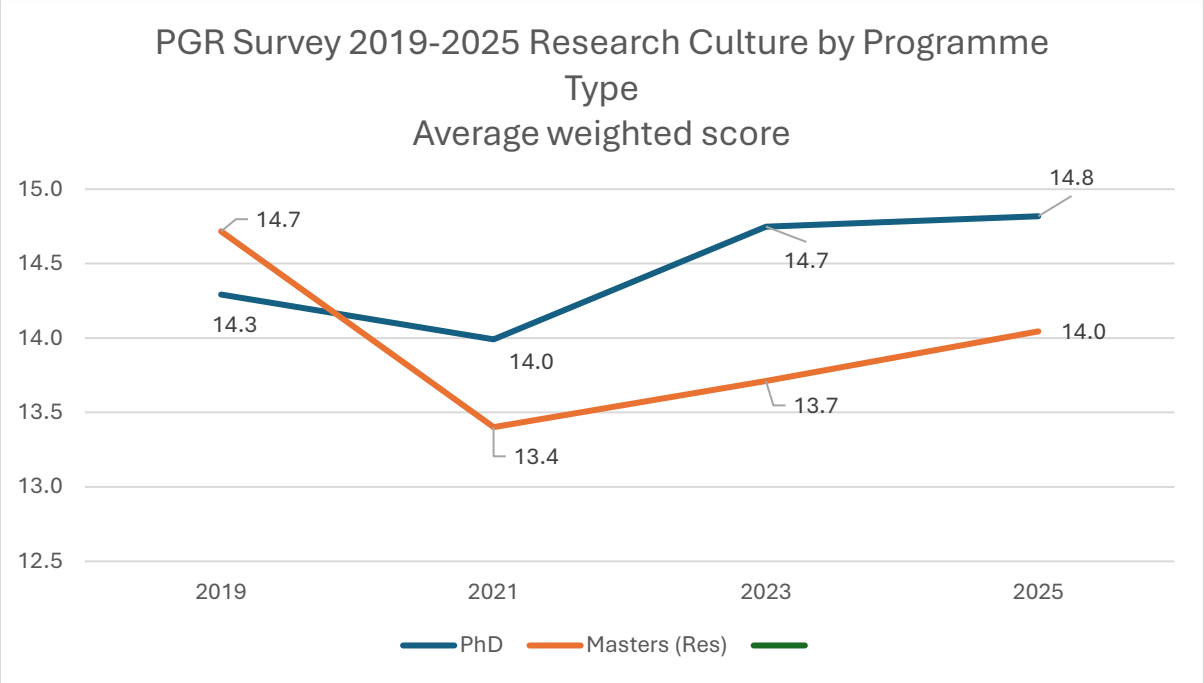

Figure 5. Research culture by programme type

Mode of study

We see contrasting patterns over time for the two modes. Full-time students scoring for research culture declined sharply between 2019 and 2021 and then rebounded in 2023, and then climbed slightly again in 2025. Scoring for part-time students increased from 2019 to 2023 then levelled off. Despite the distinct patterns for the two sub-groups, average scoring for the two groups was at its closest in 2023. It's difficult to predict what trajectories full-time and part-time students might see in research culture in the next set of data.

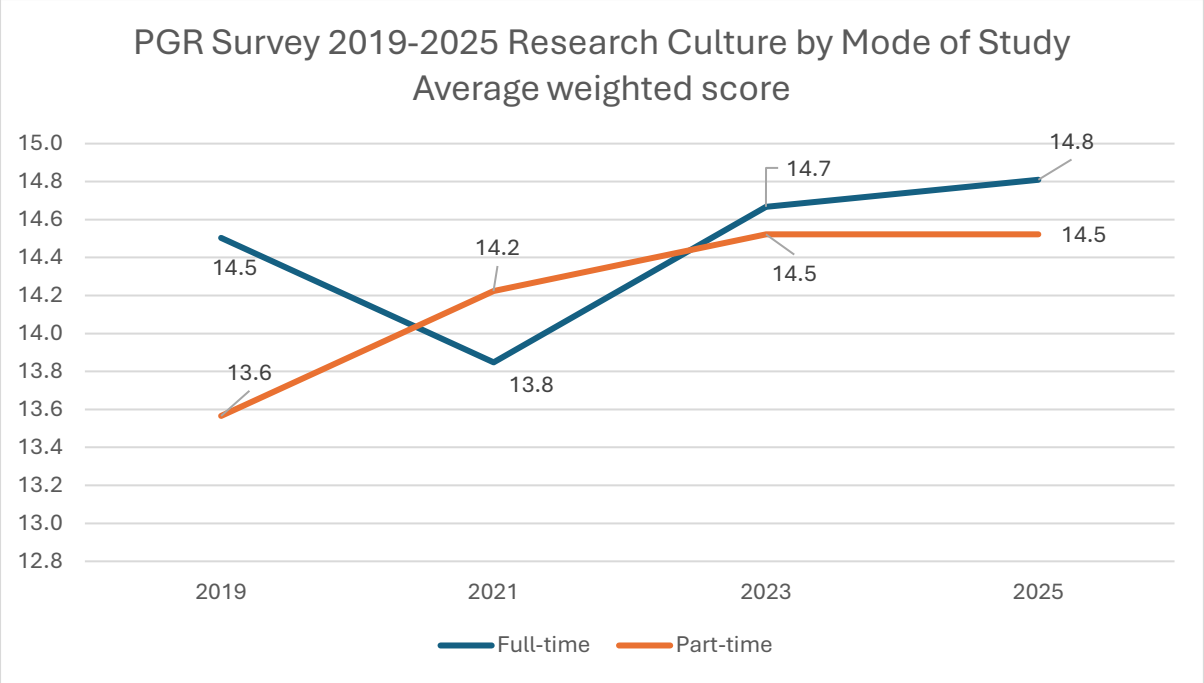

Figure 6. Research culture by mode of study

Field of study (PhD only)

There was broadly similar mean scoring and pattern over time for PhD students studying in STEM and AHSS, although STEM scoring was marginally higher in all years except 2021. As noted under gender, the greater proportion of female students in AHSS and slightly lower mean scoring in this likely contributed to the small gender difference we saw in mean research culture scoring.

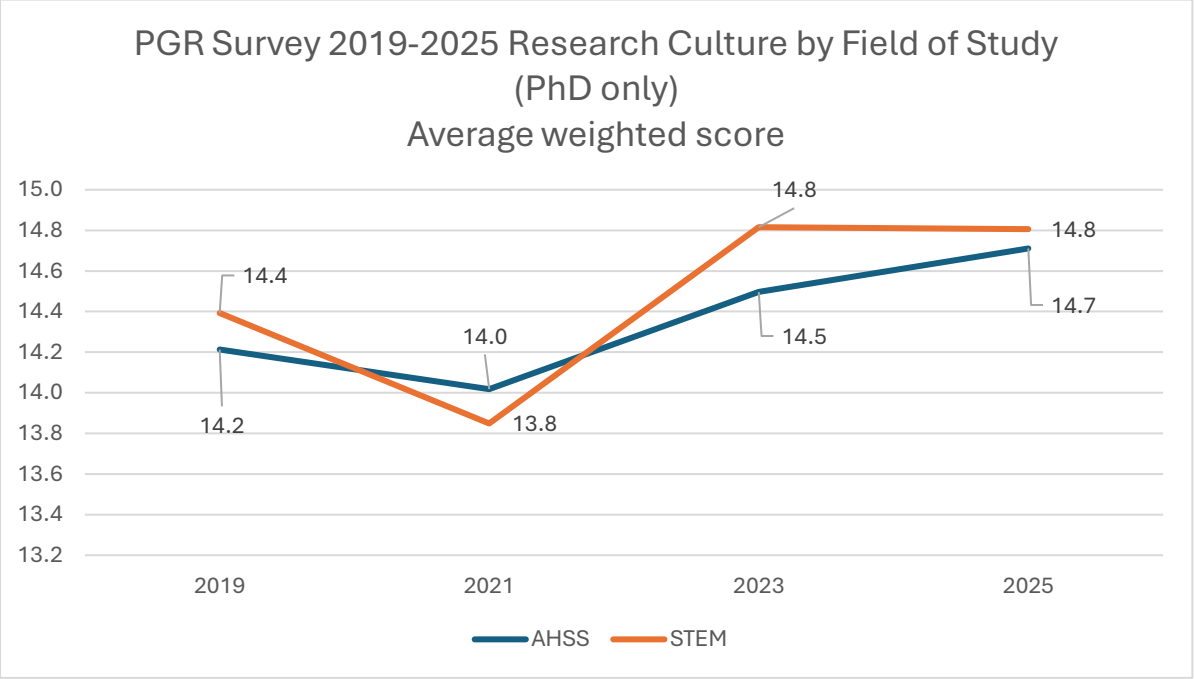

Figure 7. Research culture by field of study

Self-funding

After 2021, self-funded research students tended to have lower scoring in research culture than those not solely self-funded, and a difference exists for nearly all years between the two groups. For those not self-funded, mean scoring declined in 2021, before bouncing back while for the group exclusively self-funded, mean scoring increased in 2021 which had the effect of equalising the scoring between the sub-groups in that year. However, the difference between these two sub-groups diverged again in 2023 (0.5 points) and 2025 (0.7 points).

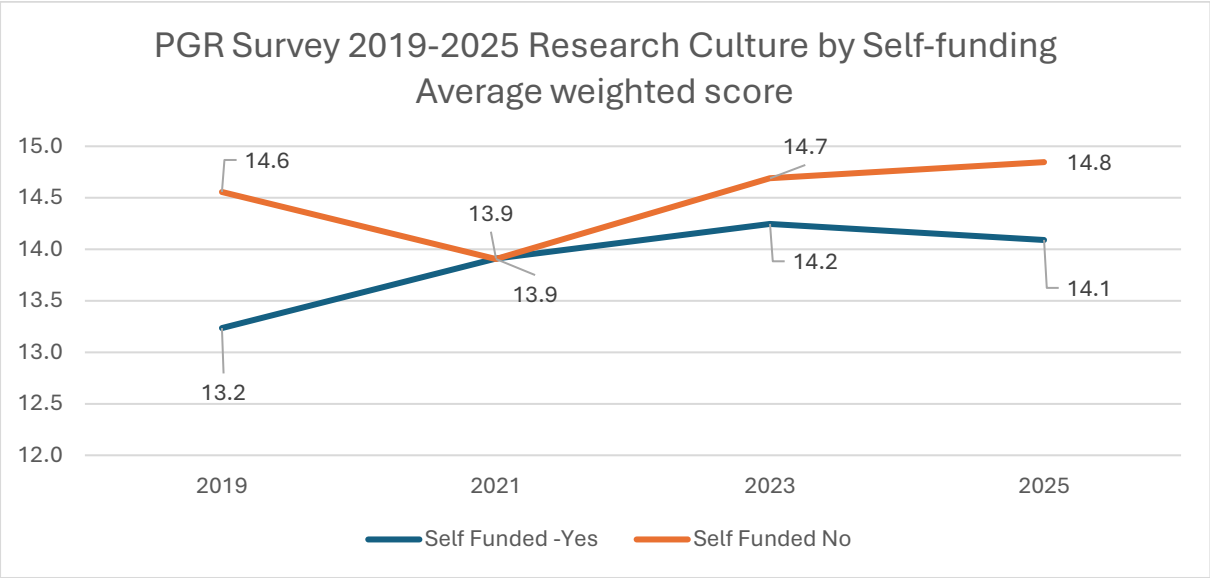

Figure 8. Research culture by self-funding

Confidence of completing PhD on time

We also looked at whether there were differences among PhD students' rating of research culture based on their confidence level of completing their programme on time. This question was a five-point scale, and we grouped those who report that they definitely or mostly agree they will complete on time as "agree", and those who definitely or mostly disagree were grouped as "disagree".

We found that those who agreed that they were confident of completing on time rated research culture consistently higher than those who disagree. For the first three survey years in our chart, the difference grew the observed period: in 2019, those who agree scored research culture 1.7 points higher on average than those who disagree, in 2021 it was 1.8 points gap, while in 2023 the difference was 2.3 points. In 2025, the gap narrowed back to 2.1 points but the gap remains.

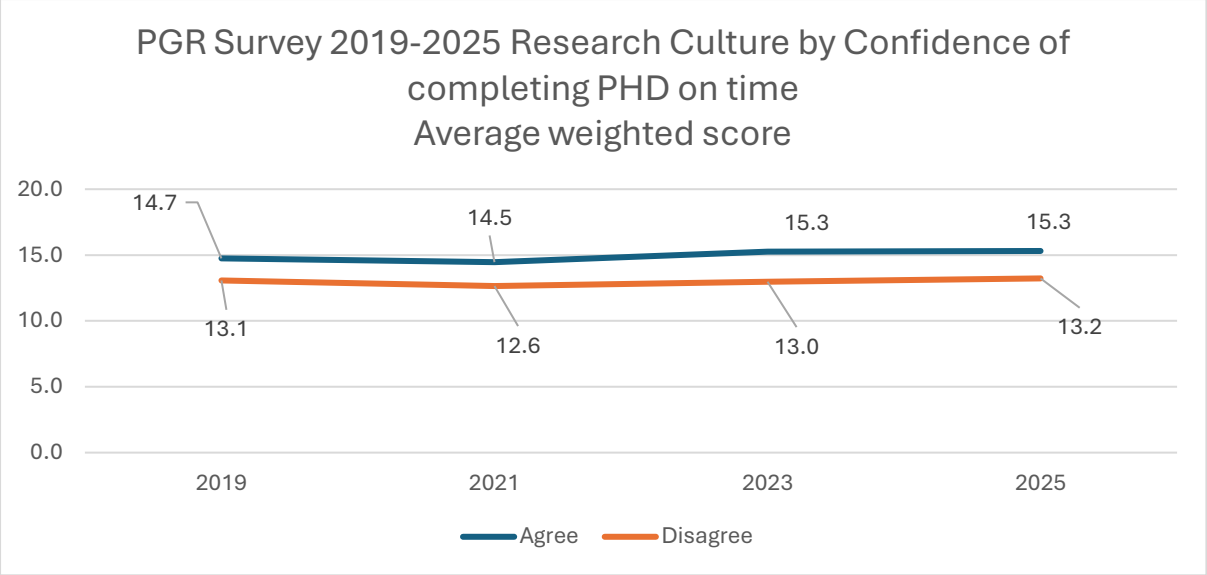

Figure 9. Research culture by confidence in completing PhD on time

Overall experience

The average research culture scoring for those who rated the overall experience of their HEI as either good or excellent was much higher than those who rated their experience as either poor or fair. The difference is consistent from survey to survey, between 3.9 and 4.2 points, and equates to about one unit of standard deviation in research culture scoring for all participants. The wave to wave trajectories are broadly similar for the two sub-groups. Research students who tended to report higher research culture scores also tended to report a much more positive experience of the institution.

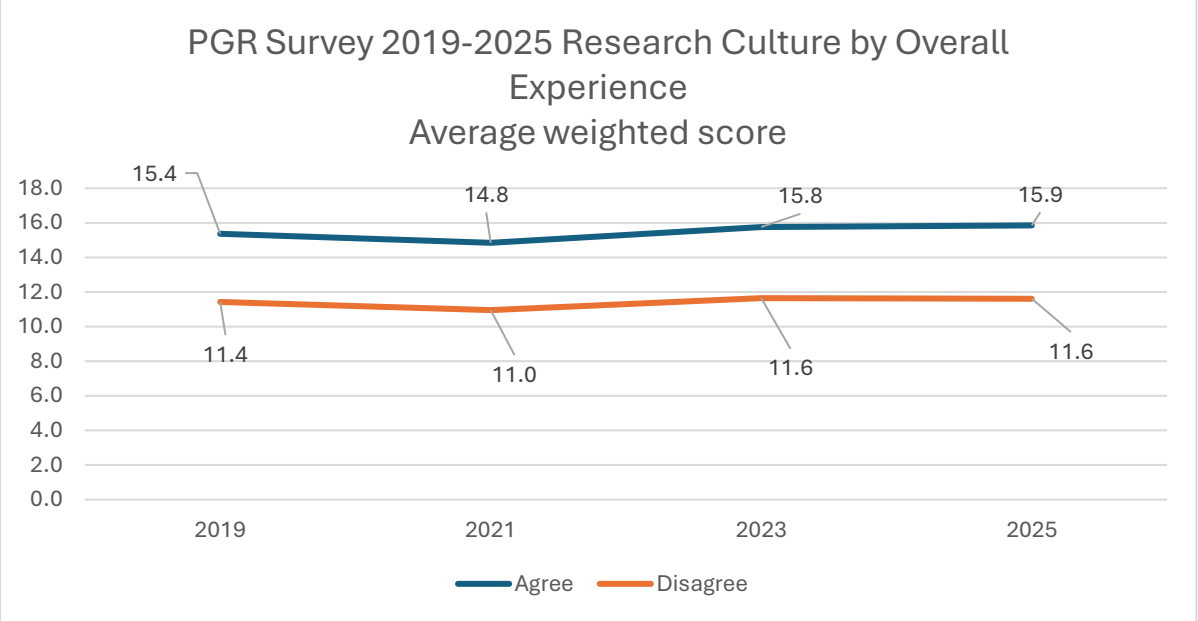

Figure 10. Research culture by overall experience

Summarising the analysis, younger students rated research culture higher at their institutions, while students at *universities* and *other institutions* scored research culture higher than technological HE institutions. There is also a defined dip in scoring in 2021, likely COVID-19 related, but overall it is not a substantial drop and most sub-groups analysed had moved away from any low 2021 levels by 2025. However, master's students have still not recovered their pre-COVID-19 scores. There was a consistently strong association between high research culture scoring and positive assessment of graduate students' overall experience of their HEI.