

# Exploring the well-being of doctoral researchers

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# Well-being and the doctoral student

- Doctoral study is challenging and the stakes are high
- Doctoral students' evolving hopes:
  - To win a Nobel prize
  - To become a professor at a top university
  - To get a good job
  - To get any job
  - To just finish the thesis
- Well-being is an issue

# Contents

- An introduction to well-being and our assessment approach
- A very brief overview of the 2009 results
- The 2014 results
  - What are they?
  - What has changed?
- What do the data mean?
- Using the data to achieve change
- Supervision and well-being – changing ideas and practice?

# Definition of construct

“That part of a researcher’s overall well-being that is primarily influenced by their PhD position and which can be influenced by college-based interventions”

# Approach

- Based upon a clinically approved methodology
- Places emphasis upon the perceptions of student population
- Rigorous process of development of an instrument to measure well-being
  - Assessment and Evaluation in HE, “A new approach to evaluating the well-being of PhD research students”
- Targeted specifically to doctoral researcher population
- A ‘one-way’ instrument

# Objectives of the 2009 assessment

- Evaluate the well-being needs of PhD researchers
- Evaluate how positive an experience Imperial has been for researchers

# The Instrument -2009

- 2009 assessment comprised 58 questions distributed across seven domains
- Developed in partnership with 'workandwellbeing.com'

# Well-Being Scores

- Based on mean score
- Range 1 – 5:
  - 1 = Not at all bothered
  - 2 = A bit bothered
  - 3 = Moderately bothered
  - 4 = Very bothered
  - 5 = Extremely bothered



# The 7 domains:

Domain	Description
Development	How the opportunities for development impact overall well-being
Facilities	How university facilities provision impact overall well-being
Health & Home	How issues to do with health and home life impact overall well-being
Research	How the experience of carrying out research impacts overall well-being
Social	How relationships at university impact overall well-being
Supervisor	How the supervisor impacts overall well-being
University	How wider University issues impact overall well-being

# 2009 results

- 1202 responses – approx. 45% response rate

# Well-being overall – 1.88

Domain	Description	Score
Research	How subjects perceive the experience of their research to impact their well-being	2.13
Home and Health	How subjects perceive the work impacts their well-being in terms of affecting their private life, psychological and physical health status	2.07
Social	How subjects perceive the social aspects of their role to impact their well-being	1.85
Development	How subjects perceive opportunities for training and career development impact well-being	1.85
University	How subjects perceive the wider activity of the college to impact their well-being	1.82
Supervisor	How subjects perceive the behavior of their supervisor to impact their well-being	1.75
Facilities	How subjects perceive provision of college facilities to impact well-being	1.72

# Well-Being Overall – Top 10

Rank	Question	Domain	Score
1	<b>Feeling frustrated/demotivated by your results and apparent lack of progress?</b>	RES	2.70
2	<b>Experiencing high levels of stress because of your research?</b>	HH	2.56
3	<b>Being unclear about the next stage of your career after your PhD?</b>	DVP	2.37
4	<b>Lacking confidence in your ability to conduct research to the necessary standard?</b>	RES	2.33
5	<b>Being frustrated with the college's administration systems?</b>	UNI	2.27
6	<b>Having a high workload that impacts on your private life?</b>	HH	2.27
7	<b>Making unreasonably high demands of yourself in the name of research?</b>	HH	2.24
8	<b>Experiencing a persistent low mood because of your research?</b>	HH	2.19
9	<b>Feeling constantly tired and run-down because of your workload?</b>	HH	2.17
10	<b>Feeling disappointed in your own abilities as an academic researcher?</b>	RES	2.16

# Summary of findings

- Men report higher well-being than women in *research, health and home, development, supervisor & facilities* domains
- Well-being declined with progress through the PhD (consistent with PRES findings)
  - *Health and home* overtakes *research* for writing up students
  - Stress becomes the main problem
- Overall results are informative and satisfactory
- Doing a PhD is hard!

# The 2014 assessment

# Objectives of the 2014 assessment

- Evaluate the well-being needs of PhD researchers
- Evaluate how positive an experience Imperial has been for researchers
- Highlight changes against baseline
- To better understand how development for supervisors should be extended or modified

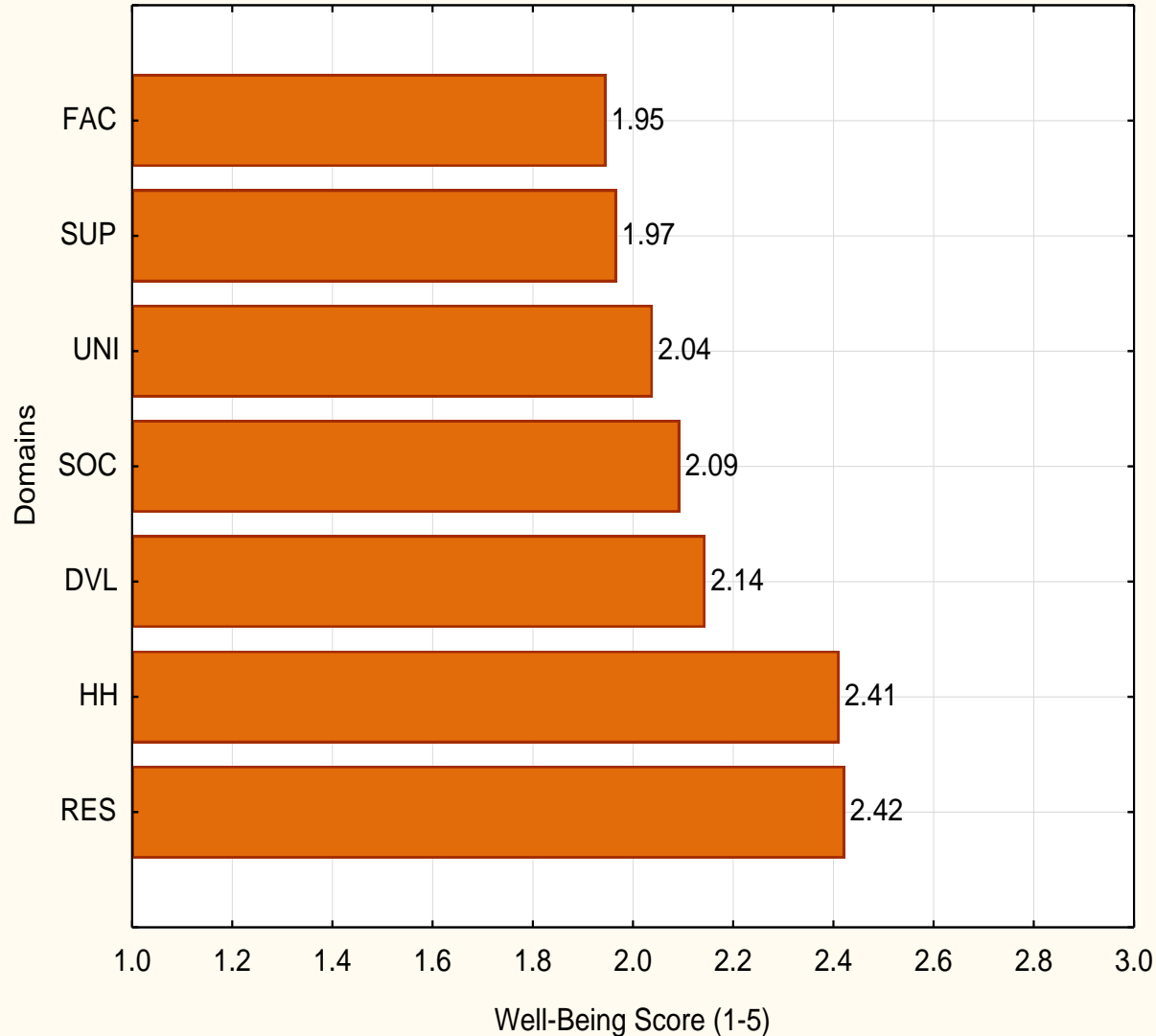
# The Instrument - 2014

- 2009 assessment comprised 58 questions distributed across seven domains
- 2014 assessment comprises the same questions/domains plus 9 additional questions
  - 7 concerning supervision
  - 1 each in the development and social domains
  - New items developed in consultation with Graduate Student Union



# 2014 results

# Overall Score = 2.14 (was 1.88)



Research and Health  
& Home domain  
scores are statistically  
higher than other  
domains

# Top 10 Offenders - 2014

9 items same – very little change in ranking

Variable	Mean
Experiencing high levels of stress because of your research?	2.84
Feeling frustrated/demotivated by your results and apparent lack of progress?	2.81
Being unclear about the next stage of your career after your PhD?	2.73
Lacking confidence in your ability to conduct research to the necessary standard?	2.61
Having a high workload that impacts on your private life?	2.59
Feeling disappointed in your own abilities as an academic researcher?	2.59
Experiencing a persistent low mood because of your research? [32]	2.56
Making unreasonably high demands of yourself in the name of research?	2.55
Feeling constantly tired and run-down because of your workload?	2.55
Being unclear about the required standard of work for your thesis?	2.55

# Research Domain (2.42)

2.13

Rank	Question	Mean Score
2	Feeling frustrated/demotivated by your results and apparent lack of progress?	2.81
4	Lacking confidence in your ability to conduct research to the necessary standard?	2.61
6	Feeling disappointed in your own abilities as an academic researcher?	2.59
15	Lacking enthusiasm about your research?	2.35
18	Finding that your PhD experience is different to what you had envisaged initially?	2.29
24	Lacking motivation to complete your PhD in a timely manner?	2.19
33	Feeling 'trapped' in your area of specialisation?	2.12

# Health and Home Domain (2.41)

## 2.07

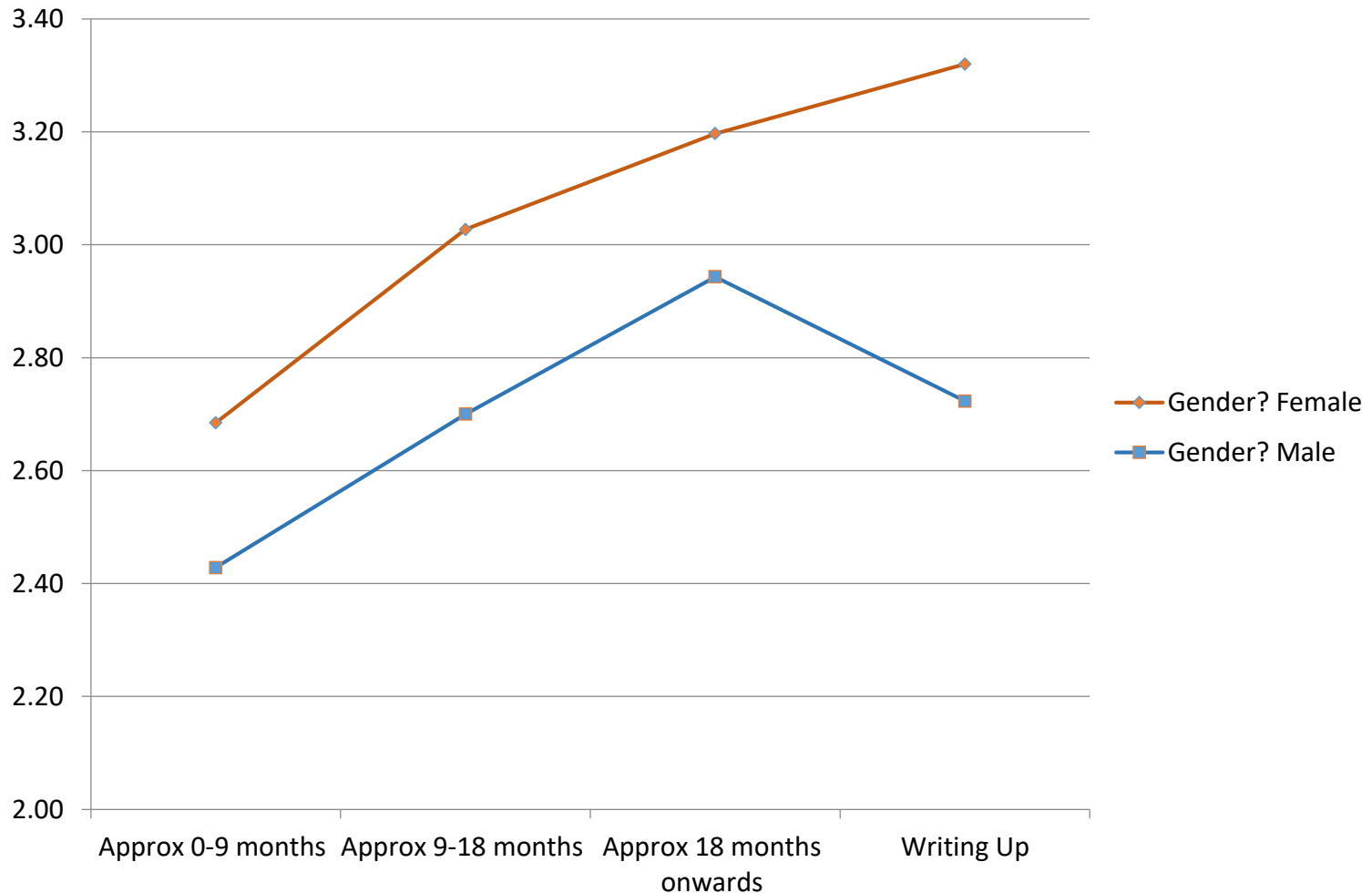
Rank	Question	Mean Score
1	Experiencing high levels of stress because of your research?	2.84
5	Having a high workload that impacts on your private life?	2.59
7	Experiencing a persistent low mood because of your research?	2.56
8	Making unreasonably high demands of yourself in the name of research?	2.55
9	Feeling constantly tired and run-down because of your workload?	2.55
11	Finding it difficult to cover your basic living expenses?	2.49
14	Being unable to balance your research with home demands?	2.35
19	Experiencing poor quality sleep because of your studies?	2.29
27	Becoming physically unfit because of your workload?	2.16
36	Being unable to eat healthily because of your heavy research schedule?	2.10
41	Experiencing physical health conditions because of your work? eg RSI, back problems	2.04

# Supervisor Domain (1.97) 1.75

Rank	Question	Mean Score
13	Having insufficient feedback during your PhD to check progress?	2.36
17	Not getting enough constructive or high quality feedback?	2.32
21	Lacking practical guidance on designing and conducting your research?	2.25
43	Feeling unsupported by your supervisor?	2.04
46	Believing that your supervisor does not know how to supervise effectively?	2.02
47	Not seeing your supervisor often enough?	2.01
51	Finding that your supervisor is very slow to provide feedback?	1.96
53	Feeling undervalued by those senior to you in your department?	1.94
55	Having a supervisor who is unfamiliar with your field?	1.89
56	Not getting the recognition you deserve from your supervisor for your work?	1.88
60	Believing that your supervisor has poor people skills?	1.85
65	Experiencing confusion or conflict due to having multiple supervisors?	1.65
67	Being supervised by a 'stand-in' eg a post doc or senior student?	1.41

# Gender - women still report lower well-being than men

# Feeling frustrated / demotivated by your results and apparent lack of progress – by stage of PhD

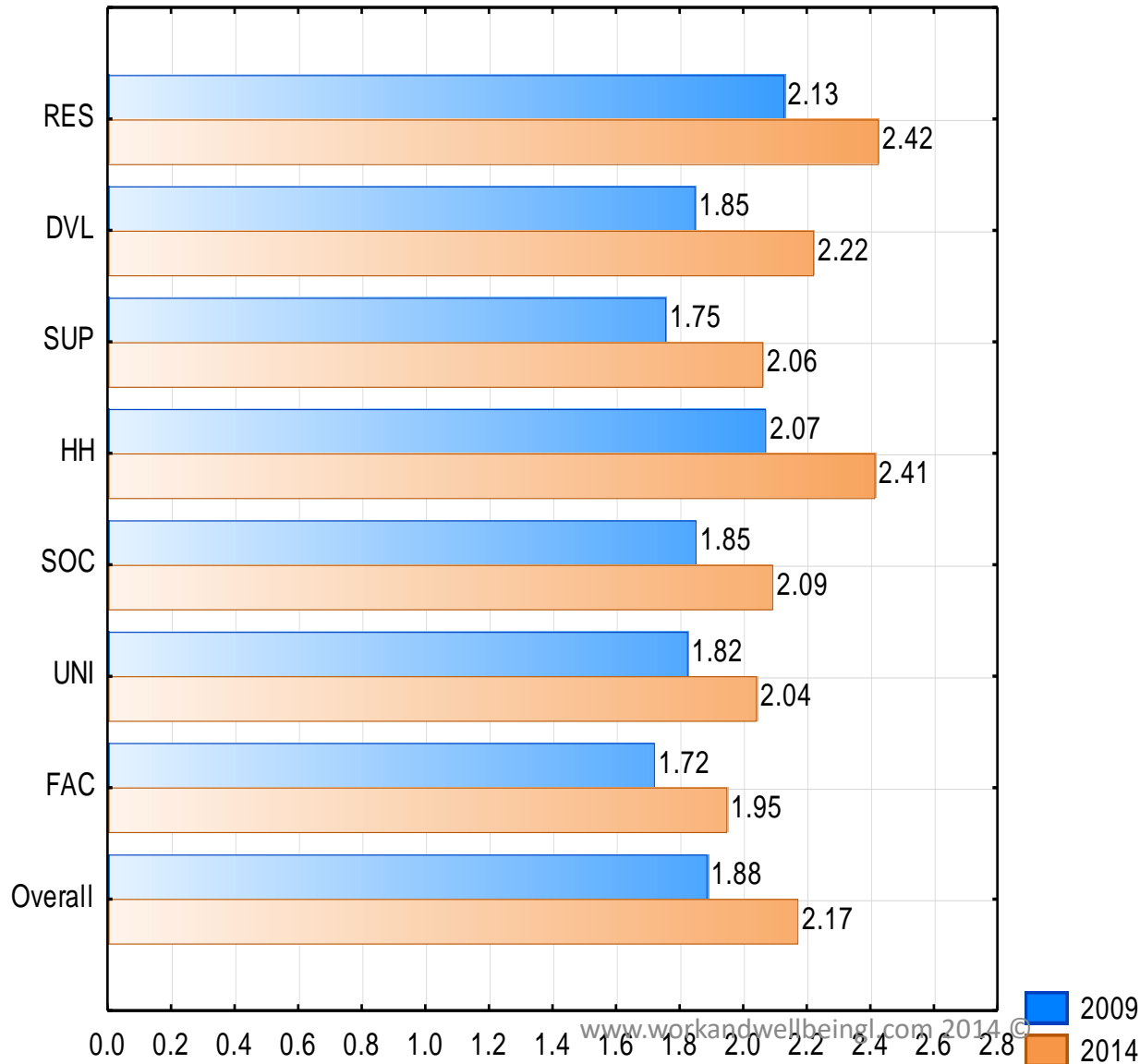


2014 data



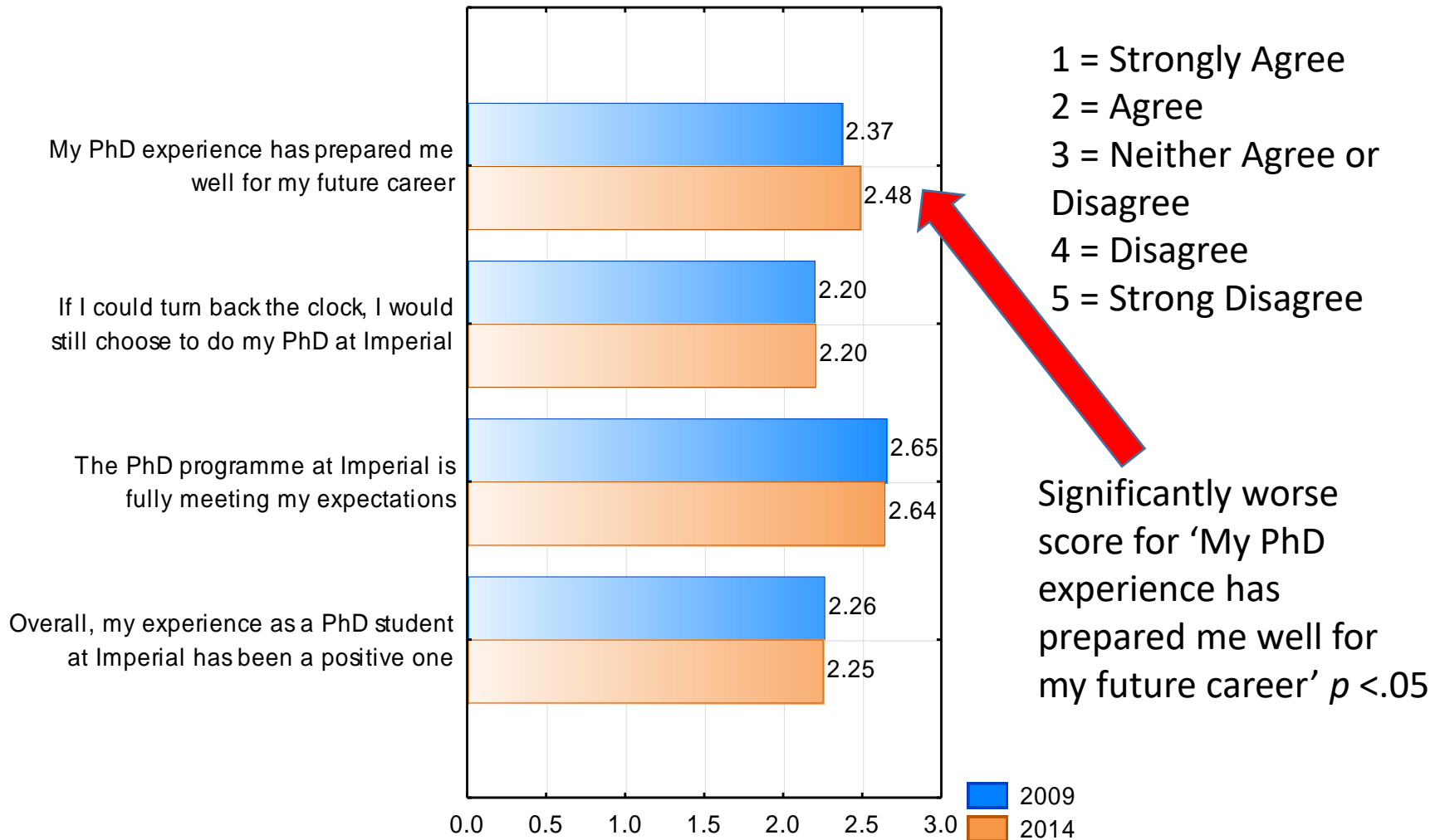
# Stage of Study - well-being still declines with time

# 2014 vs 2009 Differences - Overall



2014 domain and overall scores are significantly higher than 2009 scores (Mann-Whitney test)

# Differences by Experience of Study



# Observations

- Overall well-being levels remain satisfactory
- Research and Health & Home domains are perceived to be most bothersome – with Supervision one of the least
- Generally, people's experience of Imperial is positive
- There is a clear link between researchers' well-being and their views of Imperial as an academic institution
- 2014 results show a significant drop in well-being levels compared to 2009 although comparisons on Imperial being a positive experience remain similar (other than views on supporting future career)

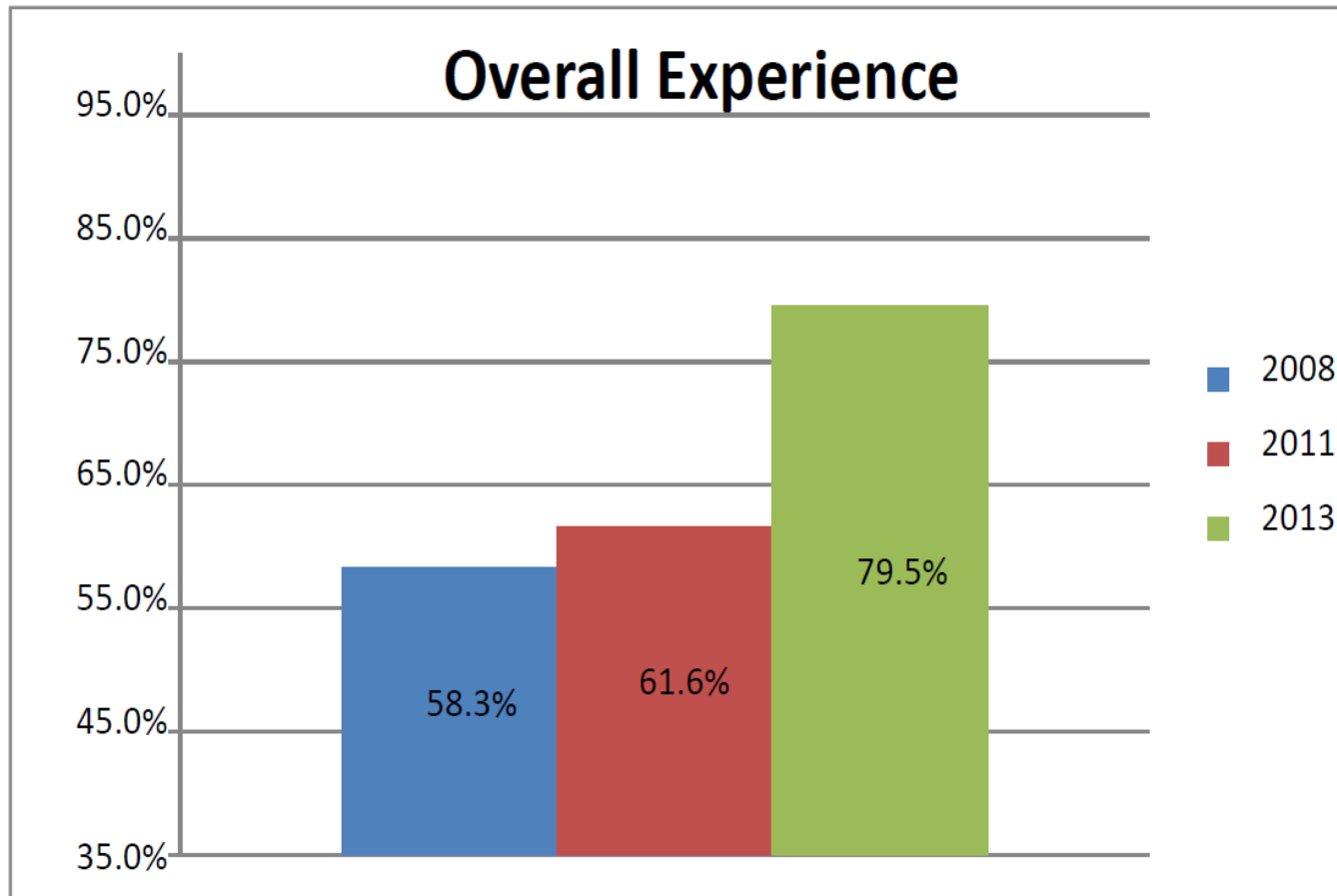
# How can we make sense of the differences?

# How can we make sense of the differences?

- Comparison with other results such as PRES
- Changing context
  - Consumerism in HE
  - Economic changes – job market
  - Levels of indebtedness
  - Completion rate pressure
  - Others
- What else?

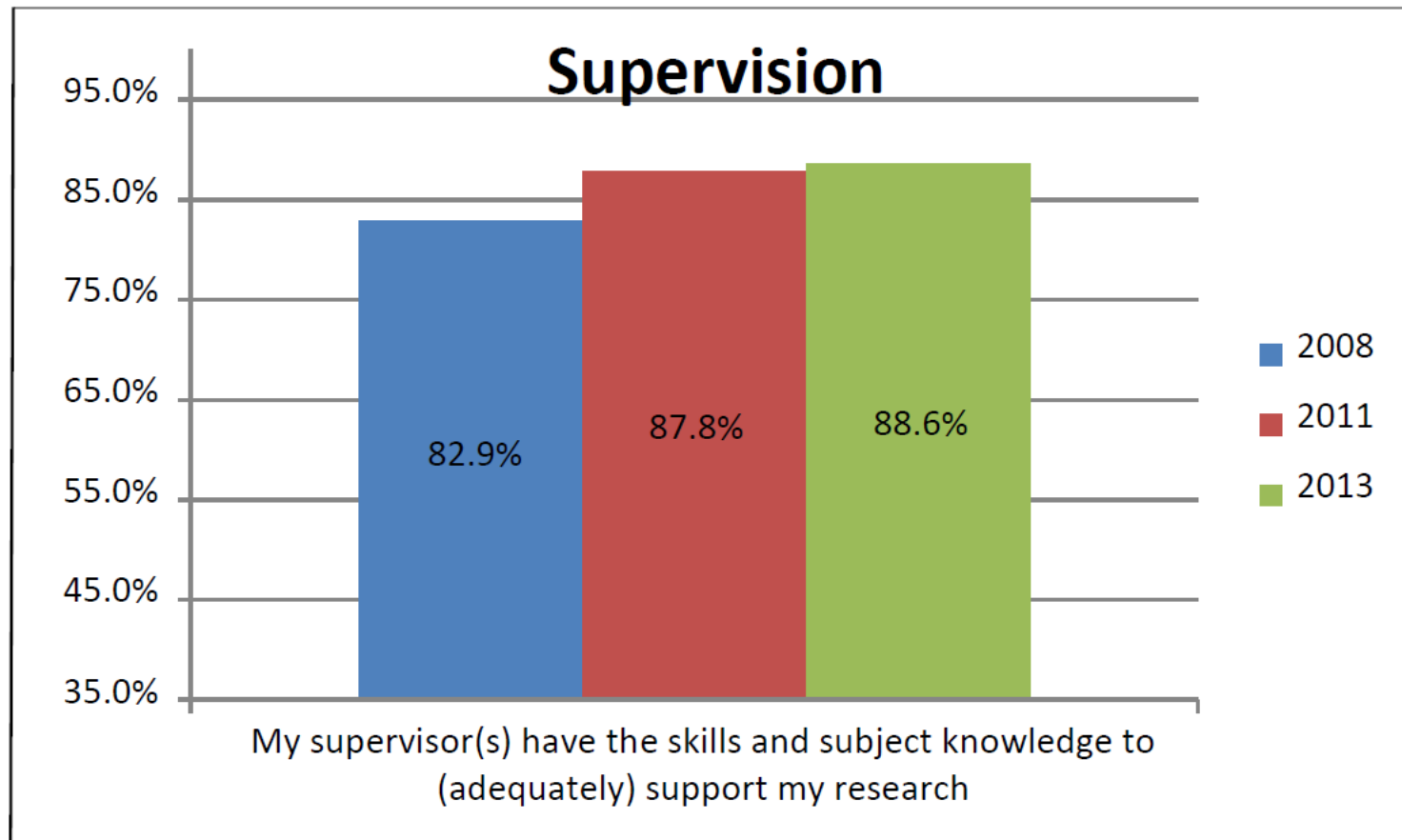
# Comparison with PRES –

## 1) % who express satisfaction with overall experience



# Comparison with PRES –

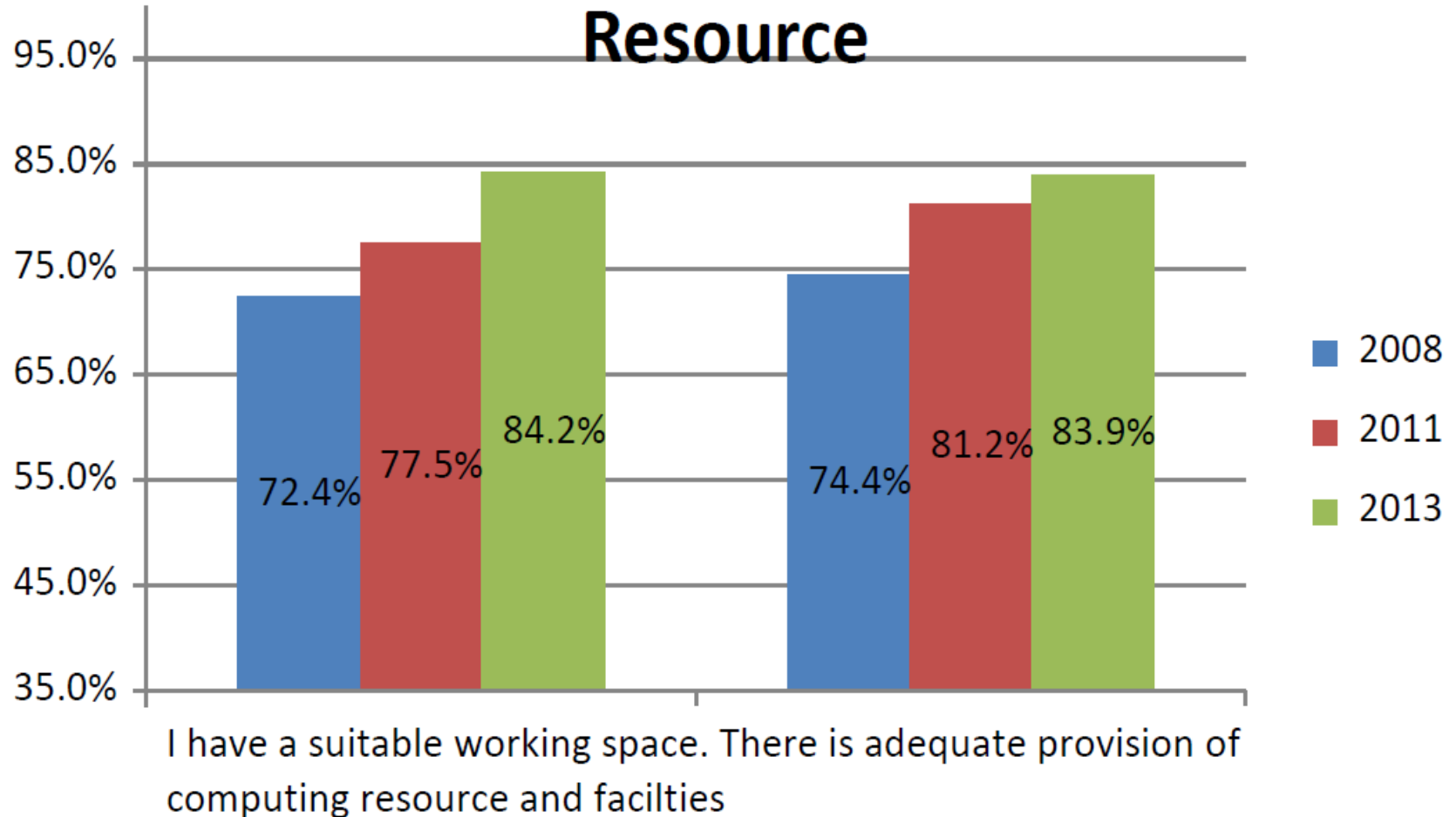
## 2) % positive re supervision





# Comparison with PRES –

## 3) % positive re Resources



# Context factors?

- Consumerism in HE
- Economic changes – job market
- Levels of indebtedness
- Completion rates

# Other factors

- Is there something about this type of assessment that changes the picture?
- What else?

# How to achieve change using the well-being data?

# Achieving change

- Awareness is the beginning of action
- Difficult to change cultures
- Need to change attitudes of some supervisors and reset expectations of inexperienced researchers
  - Better informed and more realistic
  - “Don’t compare your inside with others’ outside”
  - It is ok to seek support
  - Encourage open communication of problems and enable peer-coaching to reach solutions

# Supervision and well-being

- Current institutional initiative to improve supervision
- Working with award winners
- Students don't attribute blame to supervisors, i.e. the Supervision scores are relatively good.

# What is the role of supervisors?

Given the performativity  
prevalent in HEIs today,  
academics must be pretty  
resilient



Can we help our  
doctoral students to be  
more resilient?

‘Resilience is the capacity to  
withstand stress and catastrophe’

# Conclusion

- The data on well-being pose many questions
- We can change advice / raise awareness of supervisors to good effect
- We can review support functions in the university
- Research will always be tough
- I believe it will be worthwhile to address resilience more directly within our university
- BUT .....

# Are we done?



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# Questions

Thank you

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