Higher Education Academy

TRANSFORMING TEACHING
INSPIRING LEARNING

Student Engagement and Skills Development

The UK Engagement Survey

2016

Jonathan Neves

Contents

Foreword by Professor Stephanie Marshall

I am delighted that more institutions have participated in our UK Engagement Survey (UKES) this year.

The benefits of a student engagement survey over measures of student satisfaction are well rehearsed; but of course, I will never miss an opportunity to reiterate the value of measuring engagement as a proxy for deep learning. UKES allows you to thoroughly interrogate the student experience, providing a comprehensive insight of how your students are engaging and being engaged with their studies, and how their skills are developing when they do so. UKES provides robust insights to help institutions identify the most appropriate teaching and learning interventions that will help to improve the student experience.

This year, the results show a student body which is highly engaged in its learning: that's extremely positive. But it is of concern that we're not engaging students as well as we might in their broader development. I am confident that if we are more successful in doing this, then the student journey, into, through and beyond undergraduate studies, will be richly enhanced to the benefit of all.

I would also like to draw your attention to UKES 2017: registration closes 9 December 2016. Many institutions have already bought a discounted 2017 survey package, including UKES and our postgraduate surveys PRES and PTES, when opting for them to be included in their HEA Strategic Partnership subscription. I do hope you will take advantage of all these surveys as they provide more benchmarking data for your institution. These surveys point to what enhancements can be made to support your students, and provide sound evidence of what you're doing to offer them a great experience.

Professor Stephanie Marshall
Chief Executive
Higher Education Academy

Quick facts about UKES 2016

- The UK Engagement Survey (UKES) is the only major undergraduate survey in the UK higher education sector that measures students' engagement with their studies.

- Developed under licence from the well-established National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the United States, the Higher Education Academy's (HEA's) UKES survey is designed to provide results to drive enhancement of the student experience within institutions. Data can be used to identify areas where students are spending their time and engaging, as well as where they are not spending as much time as expected. All this information can also be combined with students' perception of how they are developing their skills – enabling institutions, and the sector overall, to focus attention on areas where students are not engaging or developing their skills as much as hoped.

- UKES first ran as a full sector survey in 2015, following two years of pilot studies from 2013, with 2016 representing its second full year. Accordingly, detailed trend analysis does not feature strongly in this report.

- The number of institutions taking part in UKES increased strongly from 2015 to 2016, although there was a slight decline in the overall number of undergraduate students taking part.

	2015	2016
Number of institutions	**24**	**29**
Number of undergraduate responses	**24,387**	**23,198**

- UKES is appropriate for undergraduates at all stages of their course from foundation through to final year, although there are typically fewer final year respondents as some participating institutions choose to not to include students who are taking part in the NSS at a similar time of year.

- The questionnaire comprises a mixture of core and optional question areas covering engagement, skills development, and time spent on academic and extra-curricular activities.

- UKES is administered directly by institutions, using the Bristol Online Surveys (BOS) system, with the support of the HEA surveys team. Fieldwork for 2016 took place between 1 February and 16 June.

- Institutional results are confidential, and were provided to participating institutions in July 2016, through detailed benchmarking reports produced by the HEA.

- This report represents a national-level view of the findings, providing a comprehensive picture of how undergraduates engage with their studies, how they spend their time, and how their skills develop accordingly.

Executive summary

Students engage strongly in a number of core aspects of learning, including critical thinking, independent learning and reflecting on their studies – all important measures which can contribute to strong academic development. The undergraduate audience in UKES also feel challenged by their course, which is a positive endorsement of their experience.

However, the results also pinpoint some areas where students are not engaging as much as might be hoped. Interaction and working in partnership with staff or fellow students is relatively low, highlighting that students may be missing out on the wider benefits of the more collaborative aspects of a learning experience.

Results highlight strong development of independent learning and critical thinking skills - a finding which seems to match the strong levels of engagement in these areas. There are also encouraging levels of skills gains in areas linked to wider personal development, such as learning to understand others, developing personal values and understanding real-world problems – all of which point towards positive developmental outcomes for large numbers of students.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of skills development, however, is a less encouraging one. Just one in two undergraduates feel that they have strongly developed skills to help them get a job (referred to throughout the report as career skills) such as CV writing or career planning. Although there are fewer final year students in UKES, this is still a notable finding which implies that there may be work to be done to complement the recognised development of wider skills highlighted above with more specific career skills.

By measuring both engagement and skills development within the same data set, UKES can pinpoint links between the two. In this case, analysis highlights that students who collaborate most with staff and other students are most likely to feel they have developed in their career skills – highlighting the importance of trying to improve the relatively low levels of engagement in these areas.

In terms of demographics, the results show a positive picture of engagement and general participation across the board among non-EU students, who appear to gain significantly in their skills as a result. There is also evidence of informed choice in how they participate, with low involvement in paid work, but high participation in volunteering and sports/societies – the activities most likely to link strongly to gains in career skills.

Findings also pinpoint a potential conflict between paid work and extra-curricular activities, with some choosing one rather than the other, although there are examples of students who manage to find time for both.

Differences between Pre-92 and Post-92 institutions, although not widespread, are particularly notable where they do occur. Results suggest that collaboration with staff and other students is more widespread at newer universities, and this feeds through into stronger skills development in non-academic areas such as civic skills. Pre-92 and Post-92 institutions also provide a particularly interesting comparison of involvement in extra-curricular activities, with Pre-92 students showing a stronger tendency to get involved in more traditional extra-curricular pursuits such as sports and societies, contrasted with high levels of paid work carried out by students at Post-92 institutions.

Overall, students who engage most in a wide range of learning aspects, and/or take advantage of extra-curricular opportunities tend to develop a wider range of skills and prepare themselves more effectively for the world of work, and this encouraging outlook is one that can provide a positive endorsement of an fully involved university experience.

1. Background

The UK Engagement Survey (UKES) is run by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in conjunction with participating institutions. The HEA provides the final questionnaire through an online template within the Bristol Online Surveys (BOS) system, as well as guidance, resources and support, while the survey is implemented locally, with institutions able to add their own bespoke questions and decide on survey timing within a four-month window.

Having undergone extensive cognitive testing during the pilot phase, UKES questions are well established, and unlike other satisfaction-based surveys, provide students with an opportunity to reflect on their learning. The questions are broadly unchanged from 2015, and comprise seven broad engagement sections (29 question items in total), 12 items of skills development (further broken down through factor analysis into four sub-areas), as well as measuring time spent on academic work (two question items) and extra-curricular activity (five question items).[1]

Status	Theme	Question area	Number of items	National responses
Core	Engagement	Critical thinking	4	23,177
Core	Engagement	Learning with others	4	23,167
Core	Engagement	Interacting with staff	6	23,183
Core	Engagement	Reflecting and connecting	6	23,164
Core	Engagement	Course challenge/ Independent learning	2	23,164
Optional	Engagement	Engagement with research and inquiry	4	17,307
Optional	Engagement	Staff/Student partnerships	3	17,505
Optional	Skills development	Academic skills, career skills, active learner skills, civic skills	12	19,222
Optional	Time spent	Academic work	2	16,263
Optional	Time spent	Extra-curricular activity	5	16,242

[1] The five extra-curricular items include an item on time spent commuting, which we have not covered in detail here.

Although institutional results are confidential, and form the basis for internal enhancement activities, institutions benefit from knowing how they are doing relative to others, which can help them pinpoint where they need to improve. Benchmarking group scores allow participating institutions to compare their own performance with the average performance of the institutions in each group.

There are currently five standard benchmarking groups within UKES, while the HEA now also offers the ability for institutions to choose their own custom benchmarks as an add-on service.

Standard UKES benchmarking groups[2]	
Pre-92	Million+
Post-92	Universities Alliance
	Guild HE

The 29 institutions taking part in UKES comprise a cross-section of regions, sizes and types. There are a number of regular participants, as well as an encouraging number of institutions that took part in 2016 for the first time (marked with an asterisk).

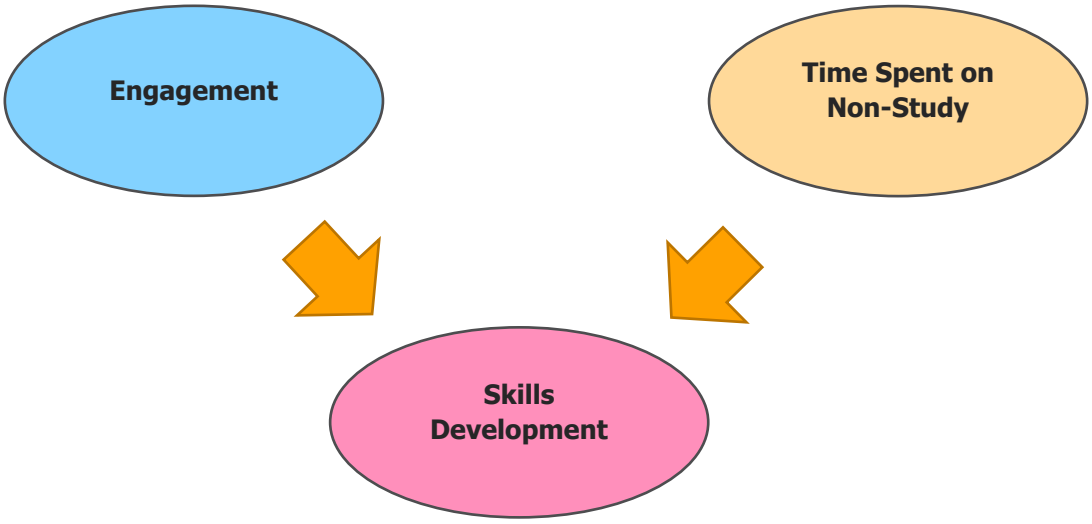
UKES 2016 Participants	
Bath Spa University	University of Cumbria
Birmingham City University	University of Derby*
Canterbury Christ Church University*	University of Greenwich
Cardiff Metropolitan University	University of Lancaster
De Montfort University	University of Leicester*
Goldsmiths, University of London*	University of Liverpool
Hull College*	University of Middlesex
Liverpool John Moores University	University of Reading
Oxford Brookes University*	University of Sheffield
Sheffield Hallam University	University of St Mark & St John*
St Mary's University, Twickenham	University of Wales Trinity Saint David
University of Aberdeen*	University of the West of Scotland
University of Bath	University of Winchester
University of Bradford	York St John University
University of Chichester	

[2] Russell Group and any other groups can be added as appropriate.

1.1 How results are reported

As outlined above, there are three sections in UKES – engagement, skills development, and time spent on activities. For each section, this report focuses on the comparison of the different items within each section among the student population as a whole, and also by highlighting key demographic and course-level differences.

A further level of analysis has been utilised (both statistical and non-statistical) to bring the different sections together – specifically to isolate which areas of engagement impact most strongly on skills development and, separately, to highlight how spending time in non-study activity can also have a positive effect on how a student develops their skills.

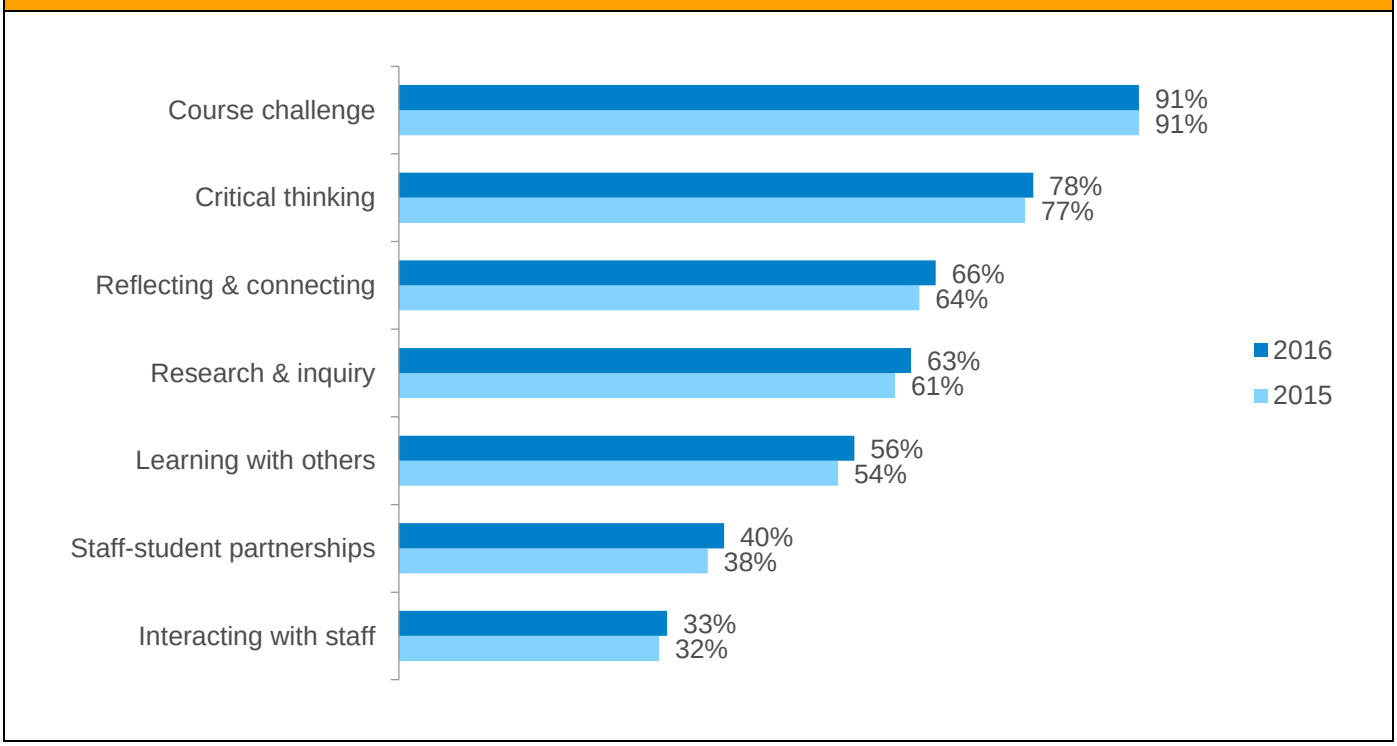


2 How students engage

As explained above, UKES measures student engagement across seven broad categories. The 2016 results highlight significant differences in the extent to which students engage, both across these areas, as well as in comparing the question items within each area. There are also significant differences in the types of students who are more or less likely to engage, which has been highlighted in the narrative throughout this report.

The table below highlights the average levels of engagement across each of the seven engagement categories.

Overall engagement per category



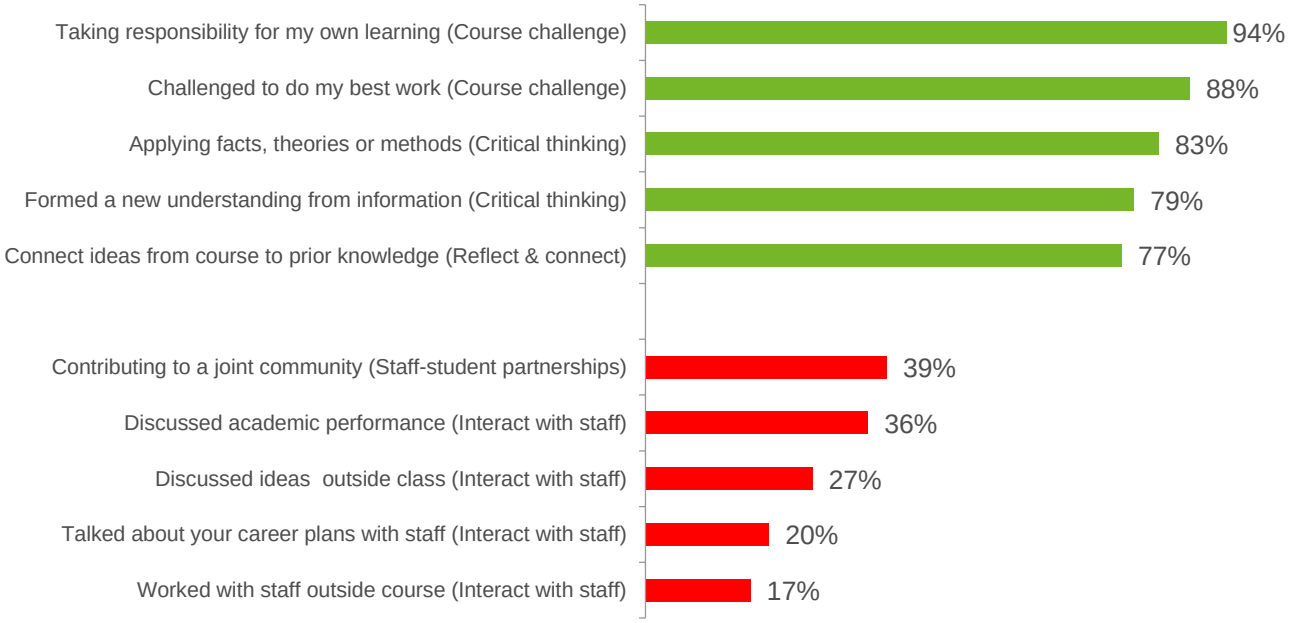
Base: All respondents (23,177). Percentages represent summed average of those who engage very much/quite a bit across each individual question item within each engagement category. (All year-on-year differences of 1% or greater are statistically significant at the 95% confidence rate.)

Although all categories have been included in the survey, as they are important indicators of a beneficial learning experience, it is perhaps to be expected that students engage the most in the more academic aspects of their learning, such as critical thinking and reflecting & connecting. It is also encouraging that students feel engaged – indeed strongly engaged – by the way their course challenges them, with 94% feeling that their course encourages them to take responsibility for their own learning. This clear recognition among students of their status as independent learners is a strong indication of the importance of independent learning, as previously identified by the HEA and Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA)[3].

[3] Thomas, L., Jones, R. & Ottaway, J. (2015) *Effective practice in the design of directed independent learning opportunities.* York: HEA & QAA.

Less encouraging, but perhaps not unexpected, is the fact that students are not engaging to a great extent with academic staff or with their peers, a finding confirmed though consistently low scores in these areas year upon year. Looking at specific items within these categories, only around one-fifth have worked with staff outside their course, or talked about career plans with staff – an area with a strong link to career skills – while less than 40% on average have worked in partnership with staff.

Highest and lowest individual engagement items



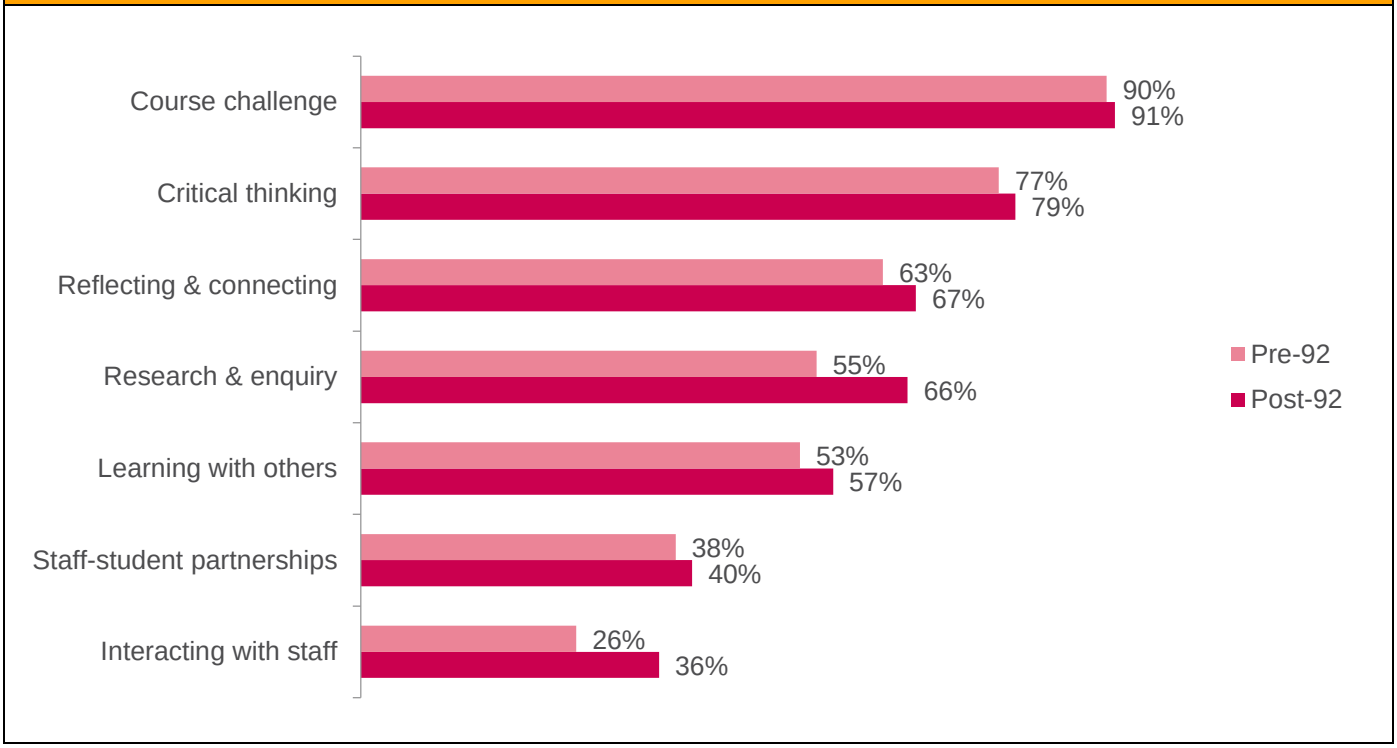
Base: All respondents (23,177). Five highest and lowest individual items for engagement across all categories

Low scores in these areas of interaction present evidence of a real missed opportunity for students, as there is scope for wider interaction with staff and peers to play a positive role in the development of students in terms of their wider skills and employability – as will be explained later in this report.

2.1 Which types of students are engaging the most/least?

As well as the demographic differences outlined below, there are some variances in levels of engagement at institution level, specifically between Pre-92 and Post-92 institutions.

Overall engagement levels per category



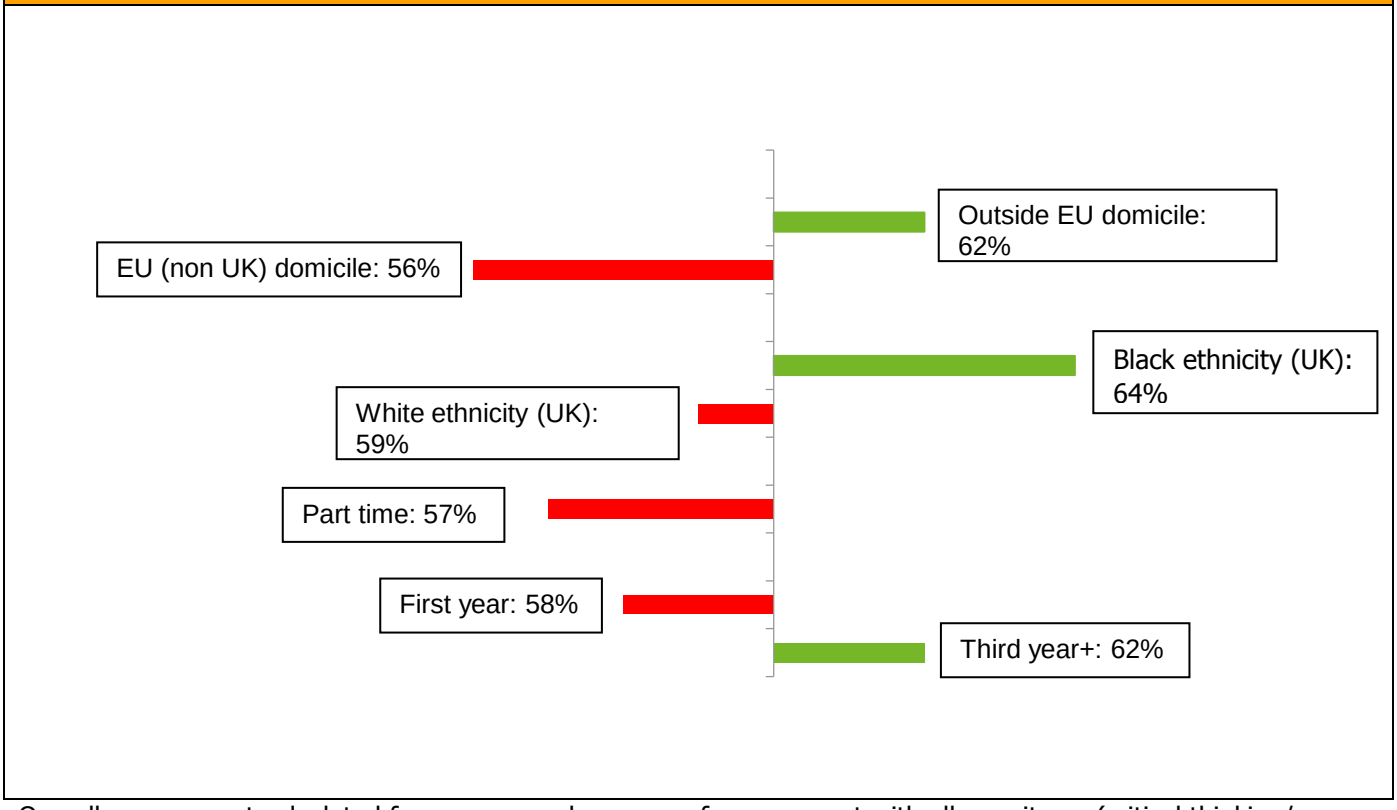
Base: All Respondents (Pre-92: 6,435; Post-92: 16,506). (All Pre-Post 92 differences apart from course challenge are statistically significant.)

On the more traditionally academic aspects of learning, such as critical thinking, and course challenge, engagement levels are comparable. However, beyond this, there is evidence of significantly higher levels of engagement at Post-92 institutions, with students being much more likely to interact with staff, and with their peers, as well as spend more time on enquiry based learning activities.

On the face of it, this is at odds with evidence from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and HEA Student Academic Experience Survey[4] that workload hours, both for taught sessions and independent study, are higher in Pre-92 institutions. However, what these findings do imply is that workload alone is a very different measure to engagement, and that engagement is particularly useful as a more nuanced measure of how students are spending their time. Accordingly there are significant differences in how students are engaging, which do not relate directly to workload hours, with Post-92 students reporting greater involvement in a range of collaborative and enquiry based activities measured within UKES. This is not to imply that Pre-92 institutions are not creating the opportunities for students to engage, but at an aggregate level there appears to be a clear difference in the types of learning activities that students are engaging in.

Looking now at demographics, there are strong indications that different types of students have a greater tendency to engage with their learning. For the purposes of this report, an *overall engagement* score has been calculated, comprised of the summed average of the respondents who agree with each of the core engagement items. In itself, the overall engagement score of 60% is not particularly significant, however, it does allow us to make key comparisons across the undergraduate audience, and identify demographic groups who are more, or less, likely to engage on these core aspects.

Percentage overall engagement (average of 60%)



Overall engagement calculated from a summed average of engagement with all core items (critical thinking/ learning with others/ interacting with staff/ reflecting & connecting/ course challenge).

[4] Neves, J. & Hillman, N. (2016). *The 2016 Student Academic Experience Survey.* York; Oxford: HEA and HEPI.

The key demographic differences are by domicile, mode of learning, and ethnicity. Overseas fee-paying students (i.e. those from outside the EU), engage strongly across their learning, particularly in terms of interacting with staff – a key area where this group of students really appear to appreciate the positive advantages that working collaboratively can bring to their development. The engagement score for this group would have been even higher were it not for a relatively low score on the category of 'course challenge' where, as we saw in 2015, non-EU students do not feel challenged by their learning compared to their UK counterparts. UK students overall show average levels of engagement but, interestingly, the lowest levels of engagement are reported by (non-UK) EU fee-paying students. This is not to say these levels are especially low, but it is interesting that EU students spend significantly less time working with other students, or with staff, and implies that their focus is on other methods of learning.

Year of study is a key differentiating factor, with a visible contrast between first year students and those who have been studying for longer (and are older). This is to be expected, as the academic experience might be expected to provide a gradual evolution in the way a student learns, both through personal development and opportunities provided. As with some of the other key demographic differences, one of the main drivers behind lower engagement among first years is the lack of interaction with staff, which may provide institutions with food for thought as to how to facilitate opportunities for first year students to collaborate with staff as appropriate.

Ethnicity is the other major demographic factor where significant differences emerge. In order to disassociate differences by domicile from differences by ethnicity, the ethnic analysis referred to in this report is based on UK students only. In this example, students of Black ethnicity report significantly higher levels of engagement than other UK students. This is the case across most individual items, but it is striking that course challenge is particularly high among Black students – with an average of 93% feeling that the course challenged them or made them take responsibility for their own learning.

2.2 Subject-level differences

Engagement in different aspects of learning demonstrates a clear link to the subject being studied, with some subjects more readily linking to the more academic aspects of learning and others linking to the more collaborative elements. These differences are showcased when we focus on the engagement categories with the highest (critical thinking) and lowest (interacting with staff) scores at a total level,[5] and break these down by JACS level 1 codes.

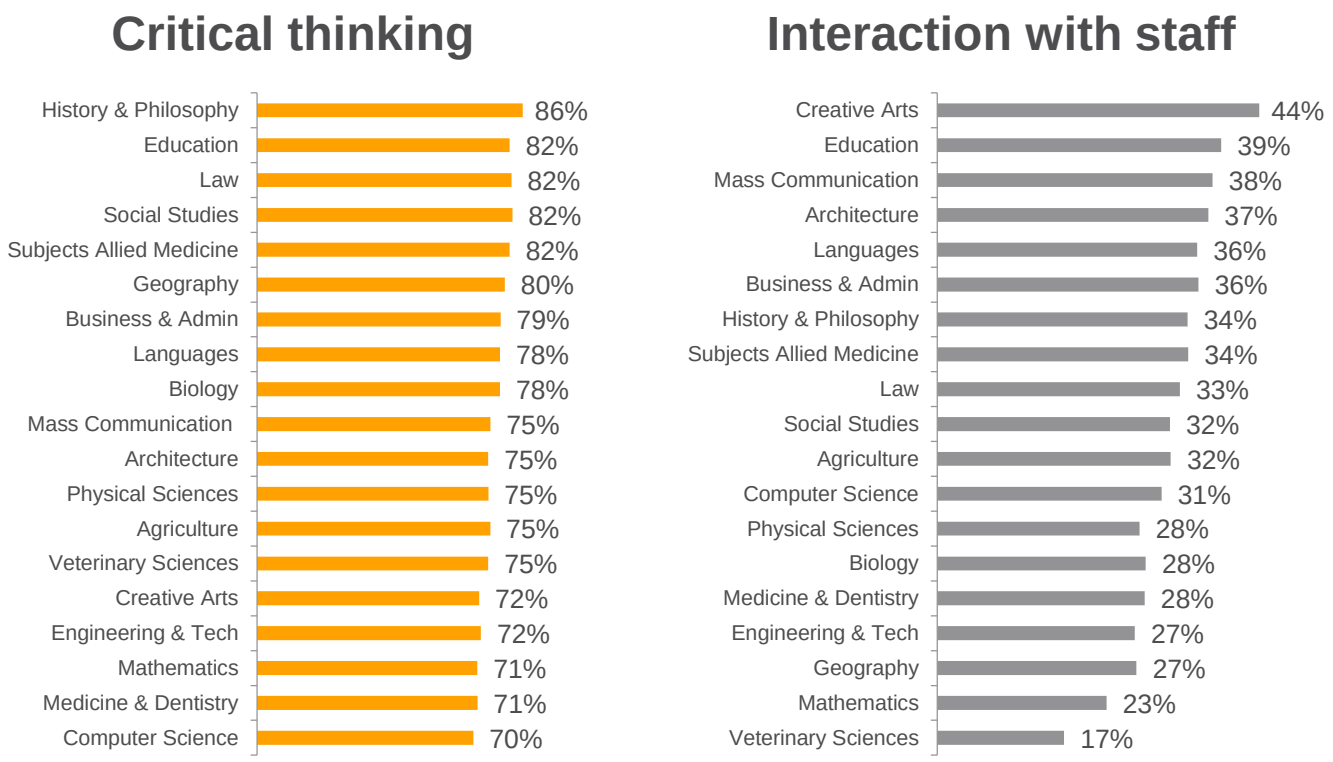
[5] With the exception of 'Course challenge', which although technically an engagement item is less about the involvement/engagement that we are measuring here, and more about opinions of levels of challenge.

For both sets of items, students in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects tend to engage the least, with Mathematics, Medicine & Dentistry, and Computer Science featuring towards the bottom of both rankings. Again, this is not to imply a judgement of how students in these subjects are being encouraged to learn, but to highlight that there may be an opportunity to broaden the types of learning opportunities available within these curricula.

By contrast, there is relatively high engagement for both sets of items among Education students – as might be expected – as well as those in History and Philosophy, and Law.

Across all seven areas of engagement, however, most of the subjects tend to report high engagement in at least one or more areas, reflecting the nature of the different types of learning required.

Critical Thinking and Interaction with staff



Base: All respondents in each subject.

3 Skills development

One of the most significant areas of where insight from UKES can make a major contribution to enhancement is by measuring the extent to which students perceive their learning experience has helped them develop a range of skills.

Twelve skills items are measured, but to help draw more impactful conclusion from the analysis – particularly the statistical links with engagement explained in chapter 4 – the 12 items have been grouped together through factor analysis, which examines the extent to which the items display similar characteristics and trends in responses.

The UKES 2015 report divided skills into 'hard skills' and 'soft skills'. While this was useful for that analysis, the second full year of UKES allows for a development of that analysis to reassess how different aspects of engagement as measured by UKES contribute to skills.

From the 12 items, four factors – or groups – have been identified, including 'career skills' as a standalone item.

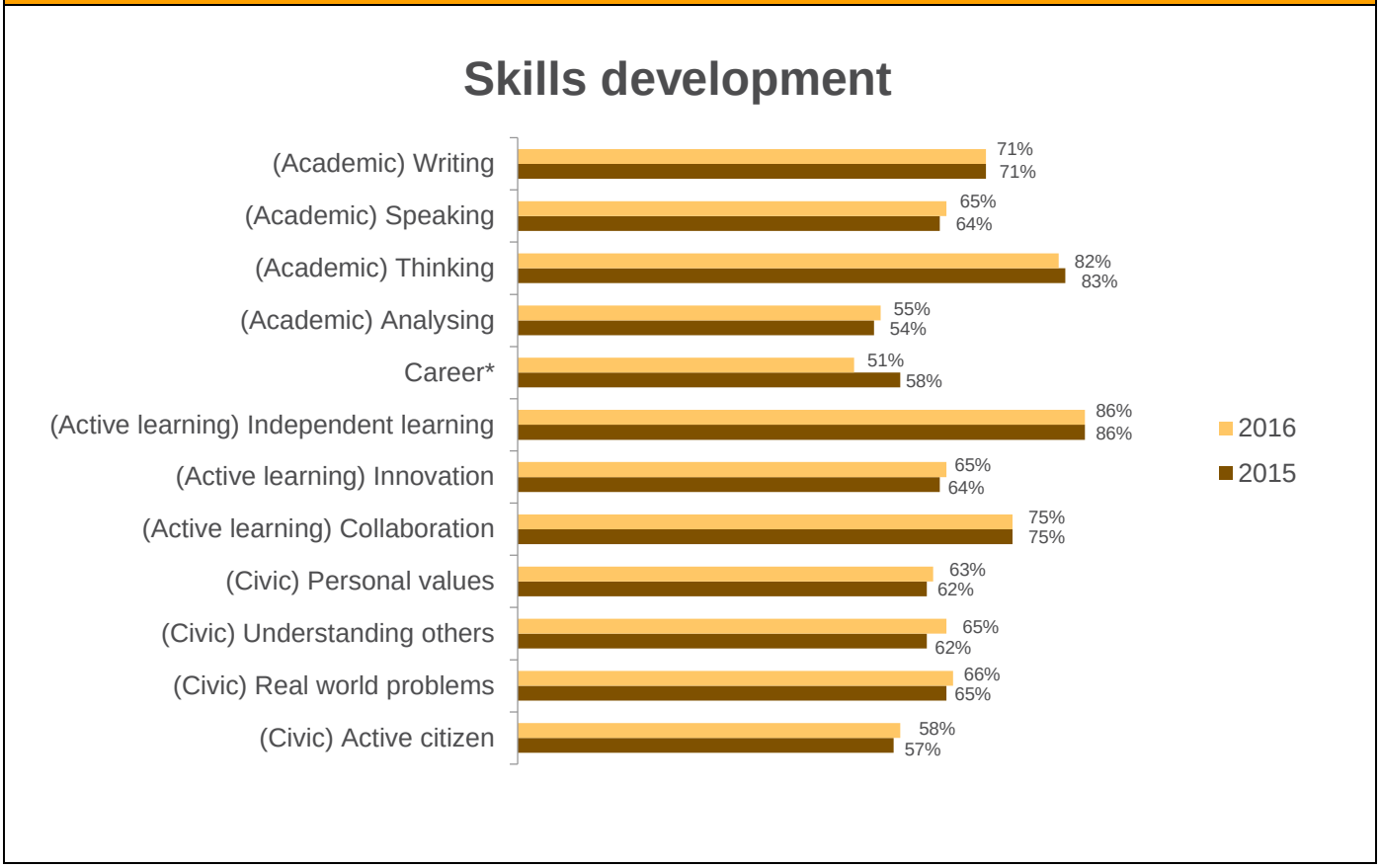
Skills item	2015 factor grouping	2016 factor grouping
Q16.a Writing clearly and effectively	Hard skills	Academic skills
Q16.b Speaking clearly and effectively		
Q16.c Thinking critically and analytically		
Q16.d Analysing numerical and statistical information		
Q16.e Acquiring skills to help you get a job such as CV writing or career planning		Career skills
Q16.f Becoming an independent learner		Active learning skills
Q16.g Being innovative and creative	Soft skills	
Q16.h Working effectively with others		
Q16.i Developing or clarifying personal values or ethics		Civic skills
Q16.j Understanding people of other backgrounds		
Q16.k Exploring complex real-world problems		
Q16.l Being an informed and active citizen		

These factors, or groups, make intuitive sense in that they reflect the range of more academic, collaborative and externally focused skills captured by UKES, with 'career skills' standing on its own as an item that requires specific focus.

Although there are now four skills groups, instead of the previous two, the new factor groupings broadly fit into the distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' skills – with 'academic skills' and 'career skills' representing hard skills, and 'active learning skills' (with the exception of the 'independent learning' item) and 'civic skills' representing the softer skills.

Before using the different factors to analyse the link with engagement, we have first looked at the individual items, to portray which ones are most likely to be developed during university, and among which types of students.

Skills development



Base: All respondents (2015 – 22,145; 2016 – 19,222). All year-on-year differences are statistically significant. (*In response to feedback, the wording of 'career skills' changed in 2016 to focus more directly on specific skills to help get a job – as opposed to more general employability. This may have impacted on the change in score year on year.)

Encouragingly, large numbers of students felt they had developed skills in learning independently, as well as collaborating, thinking and writing. By contrast, only half of students had developed specific skills to help them get a job (career skills), something that may impact negatively on student outcomes. The next lowest item in terms of development was analytical skills, although the nature of different subjects plays a big role in this – as we would not expect all subjects to have a big focus on analysis.

Indeed, the subject studied is a key differentiator in terms of the different skills developed by students, as outlined in the table below.

Skills item	Total %	Subjects with high development	Subjects with low development
(Academic) Writing clearly and effectively	71%	Languages: **84%** Historical studies: **83%**	Medicine: **45%** Veterinary Sciences: **53%**
(Academic) Speaking clearly and effectively	65%	Business & Admin: **73%** Languages: **73%**	Mathematics: **42%** Computer Science: **53%**
(Academic) Thinking critically and analytically	82%	Historical Studies: **88%** Veterinary Sciences: **88%**	Creative Studies: **77%** Engineering: **79%**
(Academic) Analysing numerical and statistical information	55%	Mathematics: **90%** Physical Sciences: **85%**	Languages: **16%** Creative Arts: **24%**
(Career) Acquiring skills to help you get a job such as CV writing or career planning	51%	Business & Admin: **66%** Agriculture: **59%**	Veterinary Sciences: **25%** Medicine & Dentistry: **34%**
(Active learning) Becoming an independent learner	86%	All subjects scores relatively highly – between 80% and 90%	
(Active learning) Being innovative and creative	65%	Creative Arts: **89%** Architecture: **78%**	Veterinary Sciences: **39%** Medicine: **40%**
(Active learning) Working effectively with others	75%	Veterinary Sciences: **93%** Medicine & Dentistry: **85%**	Historical Studies: **59%** Law: **62%**
(Civic) Developing or clarifying personal values or ethics	63%	Subjects Allied to Medicine: **78%** Social Studies: **73%**	Mathematics: **38%** Physical Sciences: **43%**
(Civic) Understanding people of other backgrounds	65%	Social Studies: **80%** Subjects Allied to Medicine: **78%**	Veterinary Sciences: **28%** Mathematical Sciences: **38%**
(Civic) Exploring complex real-world problems	66%	Social studies: **80%** Medicine & Dentistry: **78%**	Creative Arts: **52%** Languages: **54%**
(Civic) Being an informed and active citizen	62%	Social Studies: **72%** Subjects Allied to Medicine: **69%**	Mathematics: **40%** Engineering: **44%**

For the 'academic' skills, we would expect to see major differences to reflect the divergent nature of the subjects themselves, and this is borne out by the contrasts between the skills developed within History & Philosophy, for example, compared to Medicine and Physical Sciences.

For the other skill areas, however, institutions and employers may well be looking for students to develop their 'active learning', 'civic' and 'career' skills, irrespective of subject in order to represent a rounded experience. With this in mind, some of the differences between subjects are striking. Students in STEM subjects, and in particular Mathematics, are generally less likely to develop civic skills, while by contrast, Social Studies and Subjects Allied to Medicine are strongly linked to development of these softer skills.

Interestingly, and encouragingly, students in all subject areas report very strong development in their independent learning skills – the only skills area with relatively consistent levels of development.

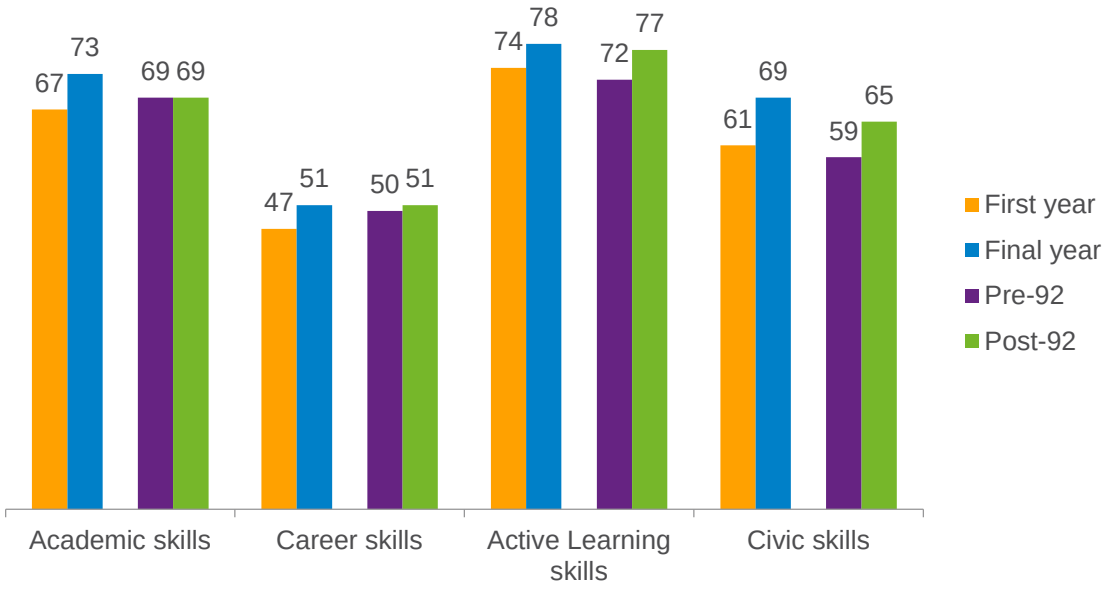
3.1 Skills development by year of study and institution type

One of the main findings from the 2015 UKES report was that students tended to report greater skills development as they progressed through their studies – a logical finding – with the exception of softer skills, which reported similar levels of development for first years compared to final years.

The 2016 findings are different in that, for all groups of skills, students report greater development by the final year, compared to the first year. This finding is encouraging, in that it implies that throughout the time at university students are accelerating their development, not just in terms of academic knowledge and skills, but in a wider range of developmental skills more associated with maturity.

In terms of institution type, there are no differences in development of academic or career skills, but on the 'softer' areas, for active learning and particularly civic skills, reported development is significantly higher among Post-92 institutions, reflecting findings first identified in 2015. This finding makes sense when we consider that engagement in more collaborative and enquiry based areas tends to be higher at Post-92 institutions, which in this case feeds through into stronger development of 'softer' skills.

Skills development by year



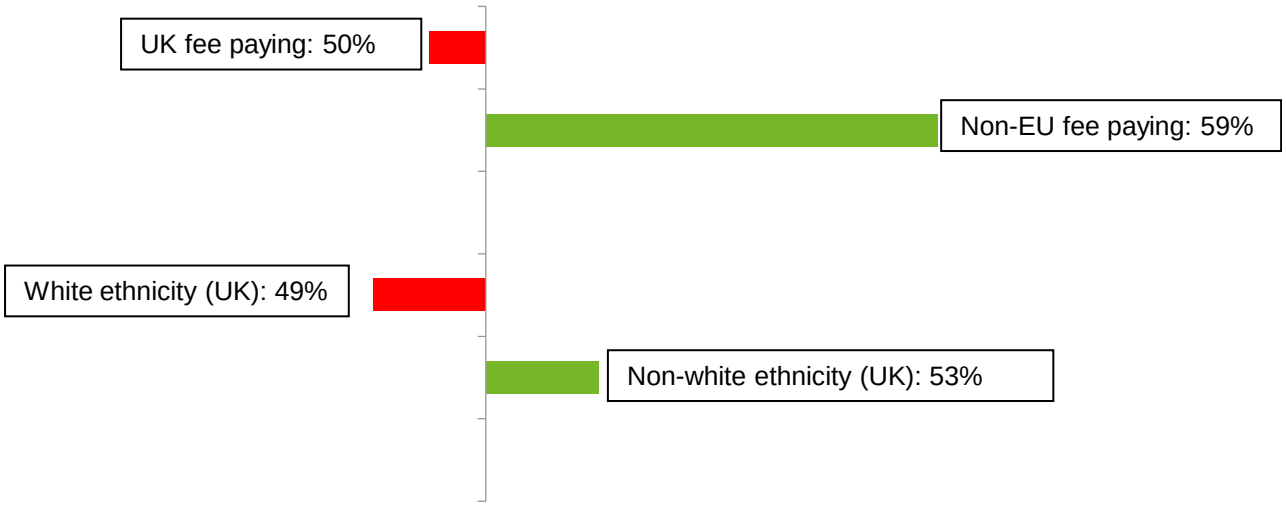
Base: First year (10,167), Final year (1,120), Pre-92 (5,448), Post-92 (13,497). (All comparisons – (First: Final/Pre-92: Post-92) with a difference of 2% or greater are statistically significant).

3.2 Career skills development

As mentioned previously, development of career skills is relatively low, and from the results above it is potentially a cause for concern across the sector that the highest score within a single subject is just 66% (Business & Administrative Studies).

There are also key differences by domicile and ethnicity on this key measure.

Percentage developed career skills (average of 51%)



Base: All in each subgroup answering the career skills question (19,200 in total).

Students from outside the EU are significantly more likely to have developed career skills (59%), compared to students from the UK (50%). Alongside the findings later in the report which pinpoint their strong involvement in sports and volunteering, this provides a clear picture that non-EU students come to study in the UK with a distinct career focus, and are clear in how they need to spend their time in order to achieve this.

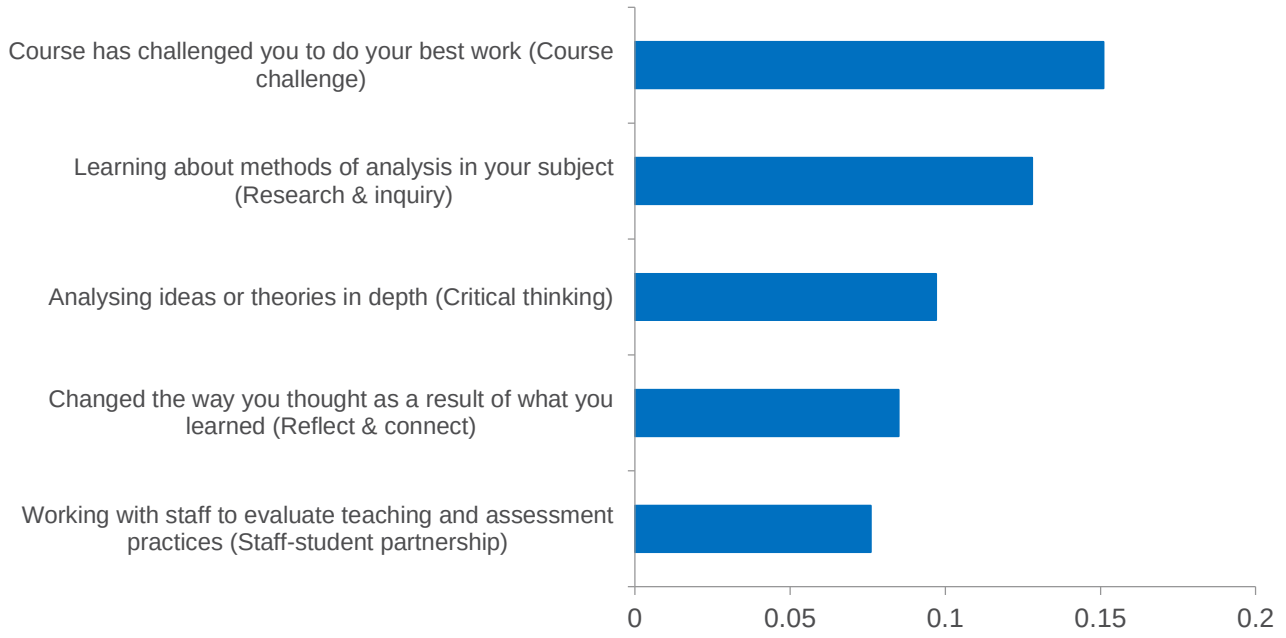
Although not as extreme, there are also positive differences among UK students of non-White ethnicity, who are more likely to report development in career skills during their time at university.

4 Impact of engagement on skills development

As identified in the 2015 UKES report,[6] a statistical link has been made between how students engage and the extent to which they develop different skills while at university. To consolidate these links, we have conducted similar analysis with the 2016 data set, using linear regression analysis[7] to identify the engagement items that demonstrate the strongest link to each of the four skills development factors identified.

4.1 Engagement impact on academic skills

Top five engagement items impacting on academic skills development



Values shown for each chart in this section are beta values from linear regression analysis.

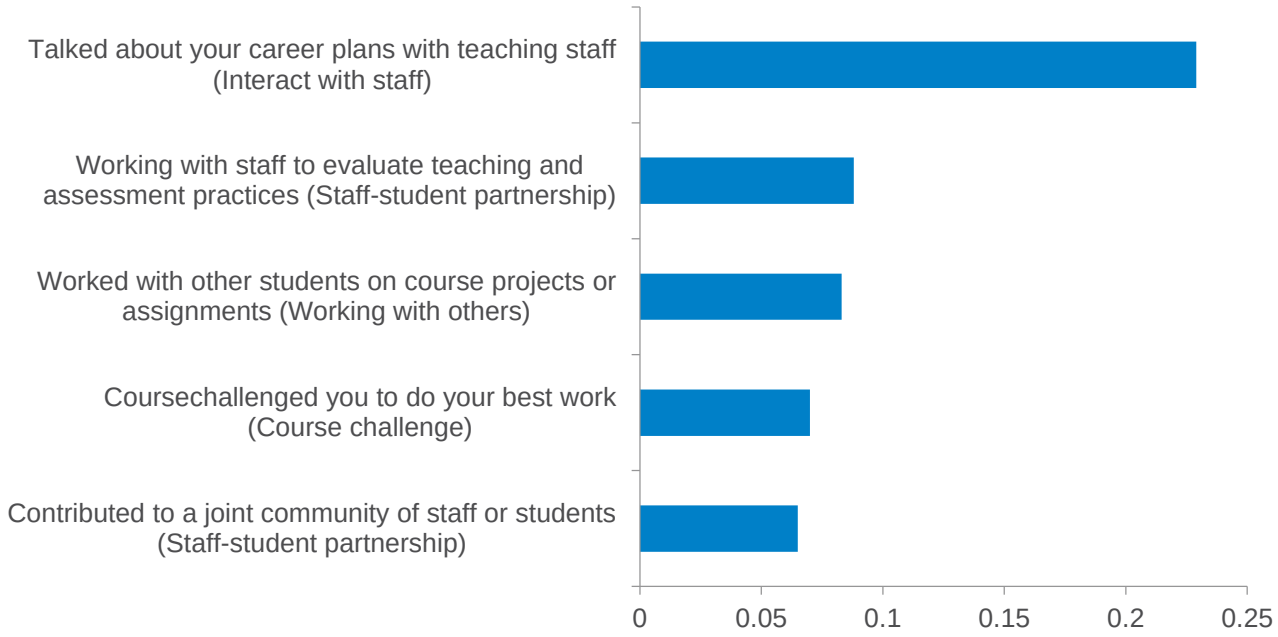
As might be expected, the more 'academic' aspects of learning such as course challenge, analysing and reflecting are strongly linked to academic skills development, although the importance of working with staff – which does not happen to a universal extent – is underlined here.

[6] Buckley, A. [HEA] (2016). *UKES 2015: Students' perceptions of skills development.* York: HEA.

[7] Outcomes of analysis comprise beta values, which are ranked to identify strongest links.

4.2 Engagement impact on career skills

Top five engagement items impacting on career skills development



Values shown for each chart in this section are beta values from linear regression analysis.

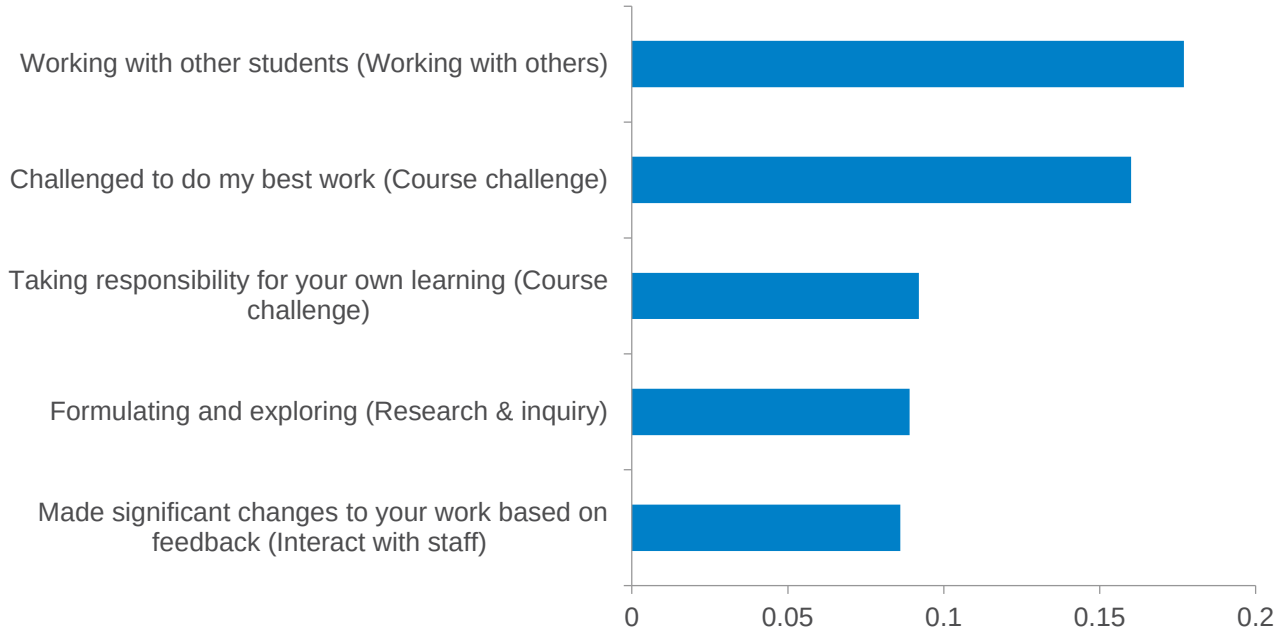
This analysis underscores the importance of interacting with staff, or with students, during learning, working in collaboration and more specifically, actively discussing plans with staff and advisors. Looking back at the overall engagement scores – as outlined in section five of this report – it is striking that these are some of the lowest overall engagement scores, with just 20% of students overall talking about career plans with staff, and just 39% contributing to a joint community of staff or students. Clearly, and as also identified in 2015, working with staff and other students can have a range of developmental benefits, and there is evidence that there is not sufficient focus on this for large numbers of students during their time at university.

Although only 20% of students have talked about career plans with staff, this is much higher (29%) among students from outside the EU, and also among UK non-White students (24%). The particular significance of this lies in the fact that these two demographic groups are also the two groups that report highest development of career skills (Sect. 3.2), emphasising the link between engagement with staff and development of these skills.

4.3 Engagement impact on active learning

Again, we see the importance of course challenge and working with other students in developing skills.

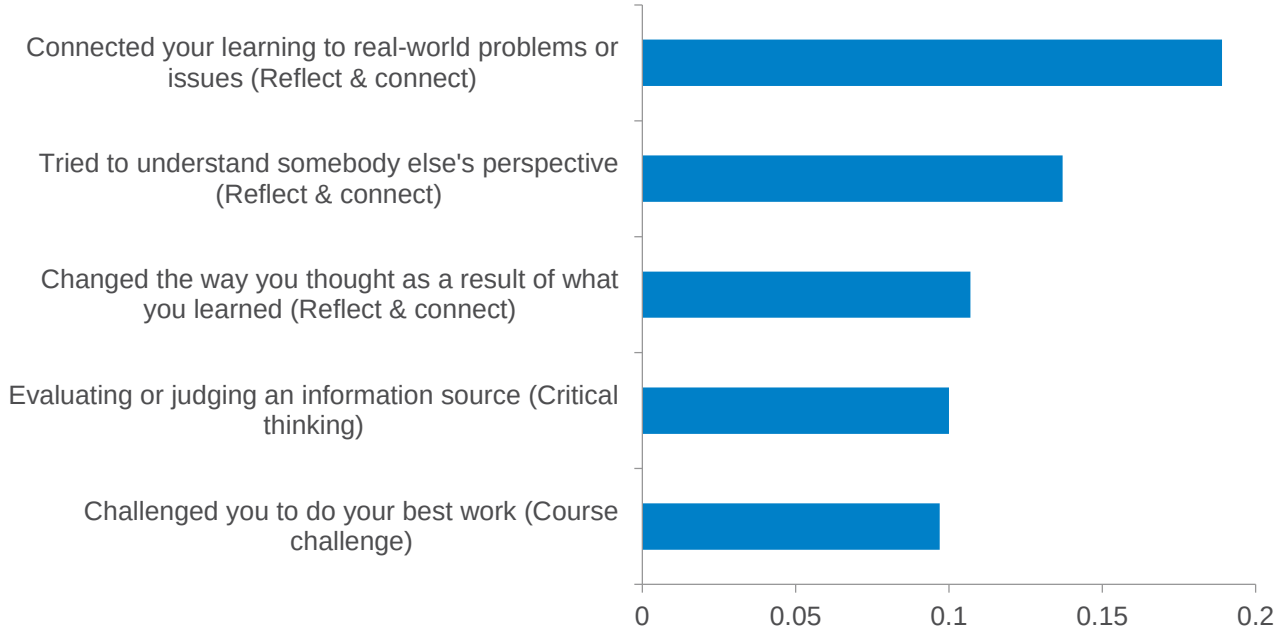
Top five engagement items impacting on active learning skills development



Values shown for each chart in this section are beta values from linear regression analysis.

4.4 Engagement impact on civic skills

Top five engagement items impacting on civic skills development



Values shown for each chart in this section are beta values from linear regression analysis.

Civic skills stand apart from the others in that the areas of learning that most contribute to their development are those related to 'reflecting & connecting' (question scale seven in the questionnaire). Evidently, the academic experience can provide opportunities for understanding other ideas and perspectives, which aid more rounded personal development.

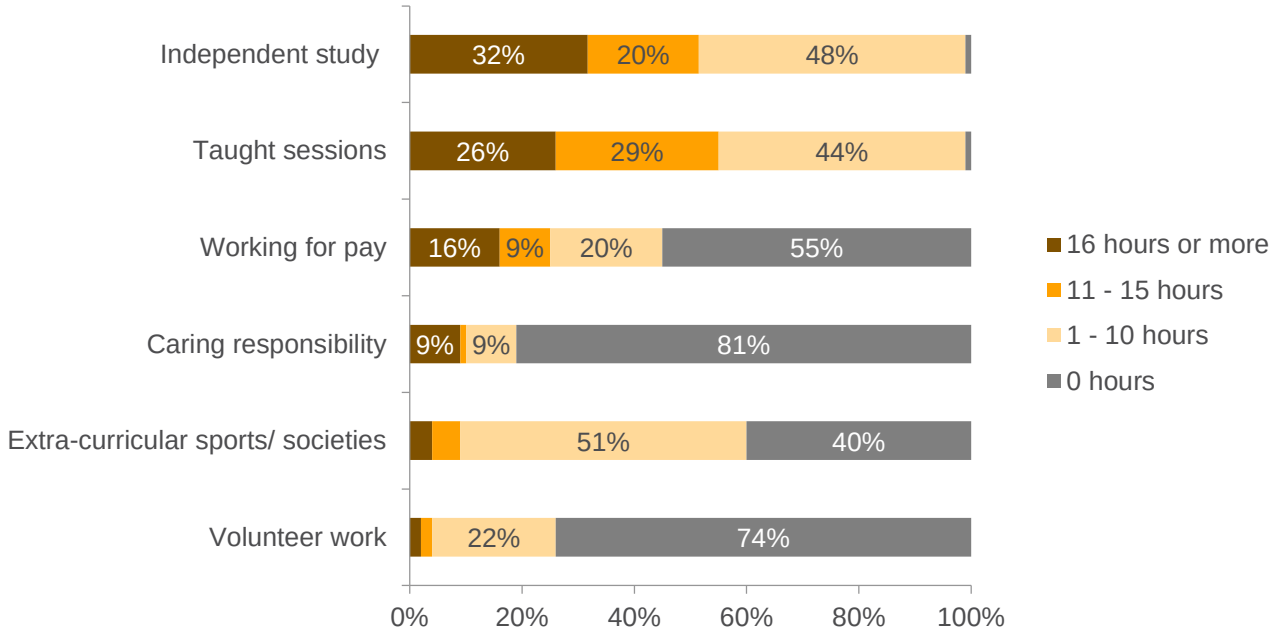
As the different charts in this section demonstrate, there are a range of different skills that a range of learning activities can contribute to. However, if we look at where students are not engaging as strongly, there is a clear opportunity for institutions to promote the importance of collaborating with staff, and with their peers, in order for students to develop a rounded range of skills to complement the progress they make in their chosen subject.

5 Time spent on tasks

5.1 Overall

Following engagement and skills development, the third main area addressed within the UKES survey is the amount of time that students spend studying, and also undertaking wider activity – either through need, responsibility or interest. Clearly, study time is critical and UKES provides one of the main national measures available. However, the additional items measured within UKES (sports/societies, working, volunteering, caring) also have significance, due to a clear link between involvement in extra-curricular activities and how students develop their skills.

Time spent on tasks



Base: All respondents answering each question (Independent study – 16,228/ Taught sessions – 16,263/ Working – 16,235/ Caring – 16,205/ Extra-curricular – 16,242/ Volunteering – 16,151).

Interestingly, the results provide evidence that undergraduate students spend similar amounts of time in independent study as they do in taught sessions – a finding that backs up evidence from the 2016 Student Academic Experience Survey.

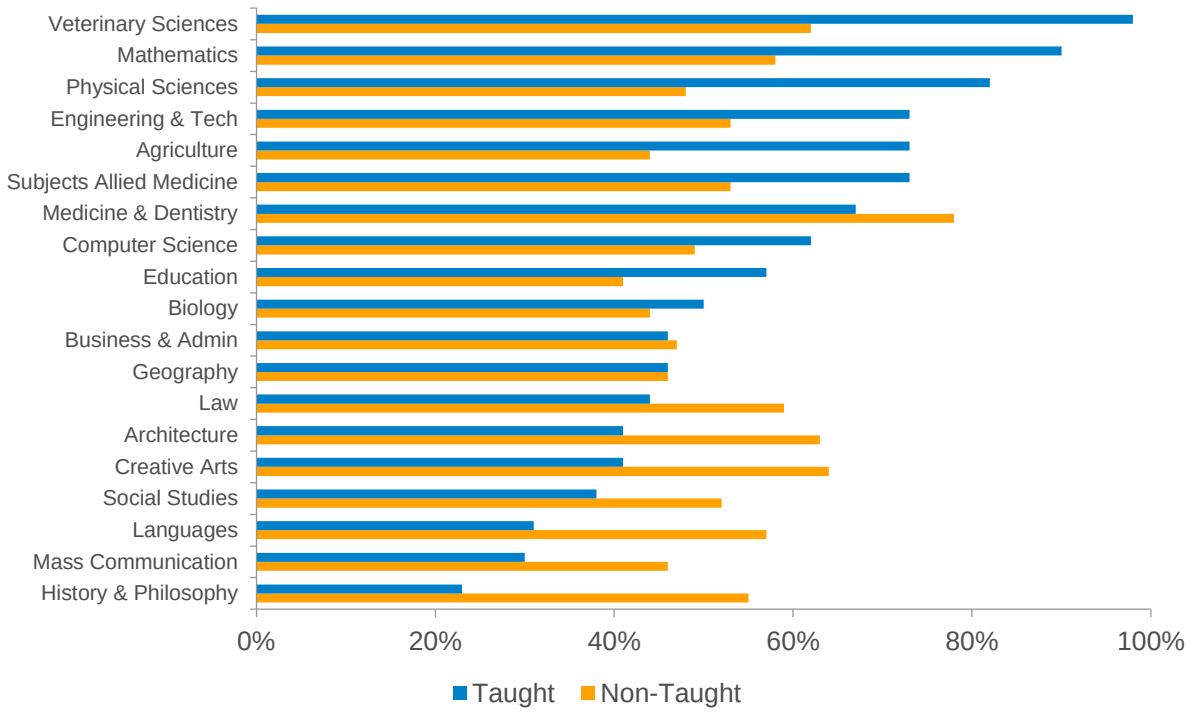
In terms of wider activities, just under half of students spend time working for pay – an economic necessity for many – while one in four choose to do volunteer work. One in five undergraduates have caring responsibilities, but this is significantly higher among older students (aged 26+), with nearly two-thirds spending time looking after others.

Although extra-curricular sports and societies are traditionally perceived as being a big part of UK undergraduate life, UKES provides evidence that large number of students do not take advantage of these opportunities, with 40% of students not taking part at all, and only 9% being involved in more than ten hours per week.

5.2 Workload

As might be expected, there are significant differences in workload between subjects – which to tend to have a high workload in either taught or non-taught hours, but rarely both. Health subjects such as have the highest taught workload, contrasted with Humanities subjects such as History and Communication. Non-taught workload (i.e. independent study) is relatively high within Humanities, but lower among Social Science subjects such as Geography. There are a few subjects, such as Medicine, Veterinary Sciences, and Mathematics, which have a high workload in both types of study.

Workload by subject



Base: All respondents in each subject. Workload of 11 hours or more (ranked by taught workload).

As displayed below, students at Pre-92 institutions report significantly higher contact hours, as well as more time in independent study, although as we saw at the beginning of this report, this does not feed through into higher levels of engagement across wide aspects of learning – which tends to be higher in Post-92 HEIs.

	Pre-92 (5,453)	Post-92 (10,656)
Taught sessions of 11 hours or more per week	63%	50%
Independent study of 11 hours or more per week	57%	49%

All Pre-Post 92 comparisons are statistically significant.

5.3 Extra-curricular interests and responsibilities

As displayed above, there is relatively high involvement in working for pay, and pockets of contribution to caring and volunteering among particular student types, but lower participation in sports and societies than may have been expected.

For all these areas, there are marked differences by student demographics.

Extra-curricular interests and responsibilities			
Activity	**Total %** **(Any participation)**	**High participation**	**Low participation**
Working for pay	45%	Female: **47%** UK domicile: **46%** Post-92: **53%**	Male: **41%** Non-EU domicile: **27%** Pre-92: **28%**
Caring responsibility	19%	Female: **21%** Aged 26+: **63%** Non-White ethnicity: **29%** Post-92: **24%**	Male: **14%** Aged up to 21: **10%** White ethnicity**: 16%** Pre-92: **9%**
Sports/societies	60%	Male: **68%** Non-EU domicile: **82%** Pre-92: **78%**	Female: **55%** UK domicile: **56%** Post-92: **50%**
Volunteer work	26%	Non-EU domicile: **34%** Final year: **33%**	UK: **25%** First year: **22%**

Within the wide range of student categories, the main differences in terms of participation in non-study activities are between male and female, UK and non-EU, and Pre-92 and Post-92 institutions.

Female students are significantly more likely than their male counterparts to spend time in paid employment, or to have caring responsibilities. By contrast, male students have a much stronger tendency to participate in sports and societies.

Although the overall level of participation in sports/societies (60%) is lower than may have been expected, this is not the case among non-EU students, 80% of whom take advantage of these opportunities offered by UK universities. With higher fees paid, there is evidence that students outside the EU are seeking a fully rounded and involved university experience. On a similar point, non-EU students are also more likely to seek out volunteering opportunities, implying a strong focus on how a high level of involvement in wider activities can foster skills and career development. This appears to be balanced by the fact that less than one-third of non-EU students spend time in paid employment while at UK universities, and it is interesting to consider whether this is a decision prompted by a conscious choice to focus on voluntary and extra-curricular activities rather than paid work, or a lack of economic need, based on funding circumstances.

Pre-92 and Post-92 institutions provide a particularly notable comparison, with some large contrasts emerging. Only one-quarter of Pre-92 students spend time working for pay, compared to twice as many at Post-92 HEIs. In sharp contrast to this only one-half of Post-92 students take part in sports/societies, compared to three-quarters of those studying at Pre-92 institutions. This high level of Pre-92 involvement in sports/societies is in line with the more traditional profile of a UK university experience, but the fact that only half of students at newer universities take part highlights where students may be missing out – either by choice or necessity. These results highlight a potential challenge for those students who spend time in paid work being able to make time to take part in the full range of extra-curricular opportunities. Although it is too simplistic to say that students face a stark choice between one and the other, it does shed light on a potential role for institutions, to ensure they are providing as much support as possible to students who have employment or caring responsibilities to ensure that wider opportunities are well signposted and are flexible enough.

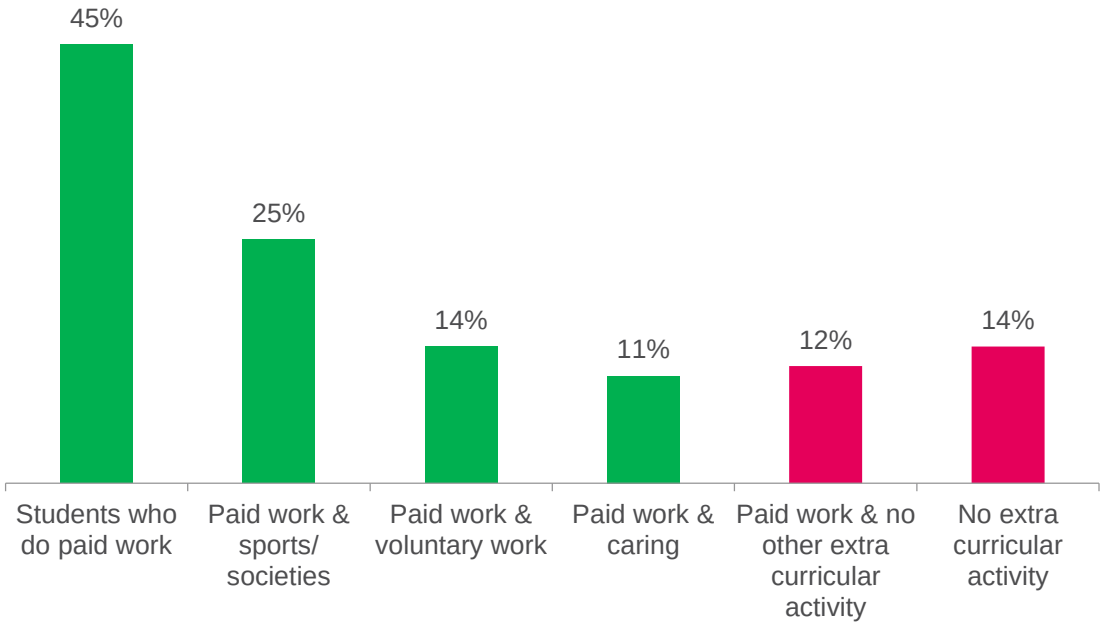
Beyond the differences mentioned above, there are also differences by ethnicity on the specific issue of caring responsibilities. Non-White (UK domiciled) students are significantly more likely to be carers, an area that potentially links into findings from the HEPI-HEA Student Academic Experience Survey which highlights the large proportions of Black and Asian undergraduates who still live in the family home.

5.4 Balancing extra-curricular activities

Results have identified a potential clash between responsibilities for paid work, and the opportunity to participate in more developmental activities such as sports, societies and voluntary work.

Finding time to do everything, while continuing to commit study time, is understandably a challenge. However, it is interesting to consider the proportion of students who manage to do this – and compare this with a cohort of students who choose not to take part in extra-curricular activities at all.

Combining extra-curricular activity



Base: All answering 'paid work' question (16,235). 'No activity' comprises students who do not do any paid work, sports, voluntary work or caring.

Among the 45% of students in paid employment, relatively large numbers manage to balance this with volunteering, caring and/or sports/societies. This is encouraging in that it provides evidence of time-management skills and proves that an economic choice to undertake paid work does not necessarily rule somebody out from wider involvement in university life.

What is particularly interesting is that 14% of students do not take part in paid work, voluntary work, sports or societies, nor do they have caring responsibilities. Whatever the reasons behind this, it could be perceived as a missed opportunity to get the most out of what university life can offer.

6 Link between curricular/extra–curricular activity and skills development

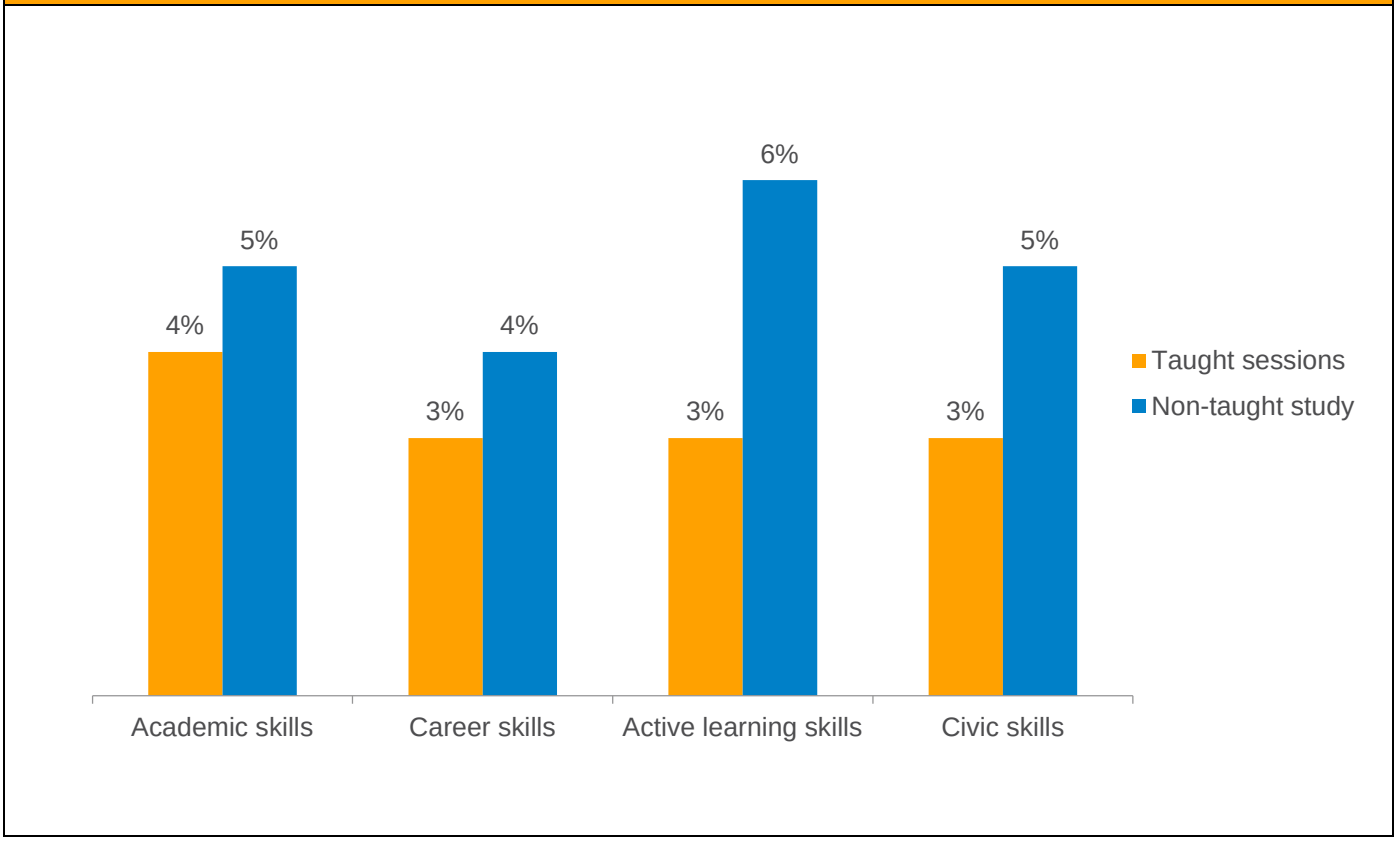
6.1 Study hours and skills development

By robustly measuring both study hours (taught and non-taught), and students' reported gain through skills development, UKES is in a unique position to pinpoint links between the two.

However, in order to illustrate in a straightforward way how study time can help develop skills, we have displayed below the percentage point difference for each of the skills items among students who participate in 11 or more hours of taught or non-taught study, comparing to those who participate in ten hours or fewer.

So, for example, if we take the impact of taught sessions on academic skills, there is a 4% positive difference in the development of academic skills among students with 11 hours or more of taught sessions (70%), compared to those with ten hours or less (66%).

Percentage difference in skills development between those with 11 hours or more of workload, and those with ten hours or less



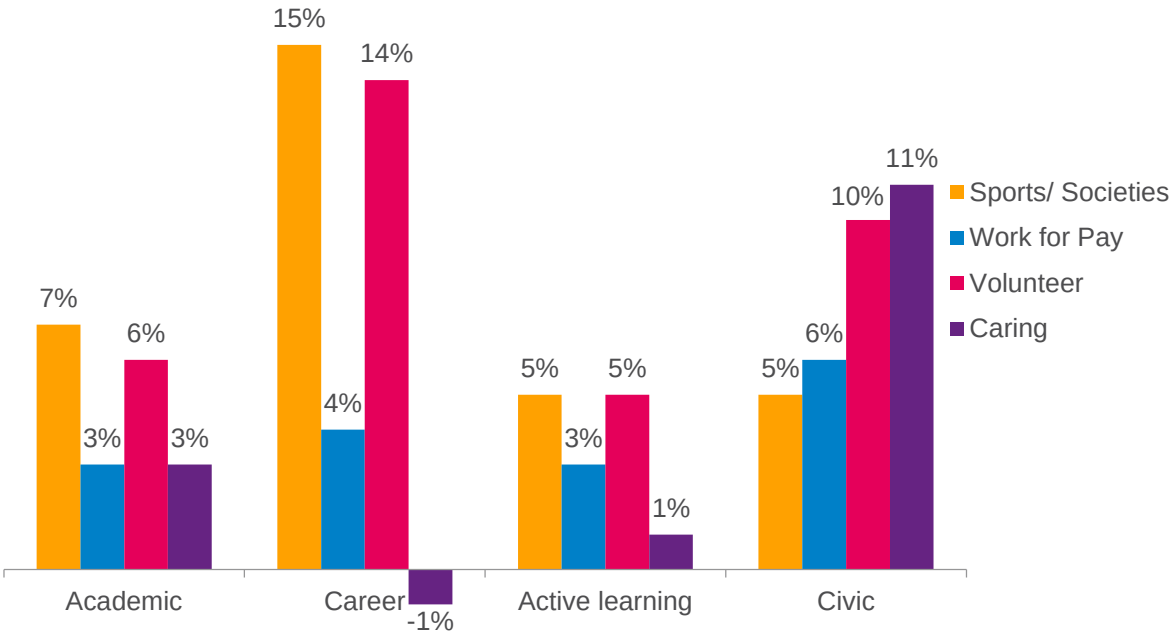
All differences are statistically significant.

Overall, non-taught study appears to have a stronger link than taught sessions to all types of skills development, and although these individual differences are relatively small, the fact that there is a difference on each of the four skills groups points towards a clear distinction. This analysis underlines the value of independent study not only in helping to develop and consolidate knowledge, but also in facilitating wider development.

6.2 Extra-curricular activity and skills development

Using the same analysis as above, but now focusing on non-study activity, we actually see stronger links with skills development.

Percentage difference in skills development between those who participate in activities, and those who do not



All positive differences are statistically significant.

Overall, the results show that participation in any of these four activities has a clear connection in the data to stronger skills development.

The most prominent example is for sports/societies, with those who take part reporting career skills development levels (56%) 15 percentage points higher than those who do not (41%). There are also strong links implied from all types of activity on civic skills, which makes intuitive sense, given that these skills measure wider development as a person – the kind of quality that might be expected to be developed through volunteering, or caring, for example.

What is also prominent is that working for pay does not have as much positive impact on skills development as the other activities, which implies that students taking work in potentially lower-skilled jobs as an economic choice face a challenge to manage their time in order to make room for participation in more developmental activities.

These findings provide evidence as to why graduate employers have traditionally placed significant emphasis on full participation in university life, and illustrate the wider benefits available to students who manage their time to enable them to do this.

7 Conclusion

The findings highlighted by UKES shine a light on where students are getting the most out of their university experience, and by contrast where levels of engagement, wider involvement, and therefore skills development are lower than might be hoped.

By identifying, beyond a direct measure of workload, the links between how students are spending their time and how they recognise their skills developing, the results also demonstrate the value of measuring student engagement – comprehensively through UKES - as a nuanced viewpoint which goes beyond summative satisfaction measurement.

Academically, students are engaging in the types of activity and developing the types of skills that undergraduate study in their chosen course might be expected to deliver. However, there are clear opportunities for students to engage more regularly with staff, and their peers, in order to ensure development of a full range of career and civic skills.

Career skills in particular are potentially an area for greater investigation and action across the sector, building on the low levels of development reported here.

Looking across all the aspects measured by UKES, there is clear evidence of a higher level of involvement among overseas (non EU) students, whose high levels of skills development provide an example of the benefits of positive engagement. Among UK students, differences by ethnicity are striking, with BME students reporting strong levels of engagement and skills development which provide a positive counterpoint to the generally acknowledged BME attainment gap which is worthy of specific attention and investigation.

Students' involvement in extra-curricular activity provides interesting complementary insight to the engagement findings. There are clear indications that volunteering, caring or taking part in extra-curricular sports/ societies can feed through into skills development, and by helping students find opportunities to do this, while balancing with other commitments, institutions can play a key role in helping students maximise their time at university in terms of what they put in, and what they get out.

8 Sample profile

8.1 Demographics

Category	Characteristic	Responses	UKES %
Gender	Male	7,681	33%
	Female	15,387	67%
Age	21 and under	16,172	70%
	22–25	3,264	14%
	26+	3,643	16%
Fee status	UK	19,604	85%
	EU	1,740	7%
	Non-EU	1,814	8%
Ethnicity (UK domicile)	White	15,562	79%
	Non-White	3,993	21%
Mode	Full-time	22,286	96%
	Part-time	875	4%
Year	1	12,093	52%
	2	7,911	34%
	3+	3,140	14%
Delivery mode	Face to face	21,738	94%
	Distance	1,283	6%

Note: For all sample profile items, base sizes vary as data was not provided for all respondents - percentages based on all respondents for whom data was provided.

8.2 Institutions

Category	Characteristic	Responses	UKES %
Type	Pre-92	6,435	28%
	Post-92	16506	72%
Mission group	Million +	3,880	17%
	Universities Alliance	7,226	31%
	Guild HE	1,551	7%

8.3 Subjects

Category	Subject	Responses	UKES %
Cluster	Health	4,292	19
	STEM	7,061	31
	Social Sciences	7,400	33
	Arts & Humanities	3,788	17
JACS Level 1	Medicine & Dentistry	445	2
	Subjects allied to Medicine	3,748	17
	Biological Sciences	2,742	12
	Veterinary Sciences	99	0.5
	Agriculture & Related Subjects	103	0.5
	Physical Sciences	673	3
	Geographical Studies	331	1
	Mathematical Sciences	448	2
	Computer Science	862	4
	Engineering & Technology	1443	6
	Architecture, Building & Planning	459	2
	Social Studies	1,731	8
	Law	880	4
	Business & Administrative Studies	2,827	12
	Mass Communication & Documentation	543	2
	Languages	856	4
	Historical & Philosophical Studies	652	3
	Creative Arts & Design	1,737	8
	Education	1,962	9

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