



The UK Engagement Survey 2017

Student participation and skills gain

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Foreword by Professor Stephanie Marshall

The UK Engagement Survey provides a powerful picture of how undergraduates are participating and being engaged in their studies.

This year, a significant increase in participation by institutions and a marked increase in the numbers of students responding to the survey, from just over 23,000 to just shy of 36,000, makes the report's findings even more robust than before.

It's very positive news that in this year's survey students have reported greater engagement in 'staff-student partnerships' and 'interacting with staff', both key areas of learning; there is gathering momentum in this improvement. The challenge of their courses and critical thinking continue to score highly in terms of student engagement, but the continued fall in the development of career skills remains a cause for concern.

A new dimension in the report is particularly revealing: indicating that those institutions with a low socio-economic profile are likely to have more engaged students who report greater development of 'soft' and 'hard' skills. Black students also report high engagement and skills development. Yet we know outcomes for these student groups are often lower than those from other backgrounds

UKES provides the higher education sector with insights into the areas of the student experience most likely to need more focus, based on the trends the report identifies.

Participating institutions, on the other hand, will now be well-placed to identify in some detail the most appropriate teaching and learning interventions to improve their students' experience, basing their approaches on the rich data and findings specific to them. And it is for this reason that I commend the use of UKES to institutions.



Professor Stephanie Marshall
Chief Executive
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Executive summary

Three full years of UKES data shed light on encouraging trends in how students are engaging in different learning activities. In particular there have been clear year-on-year increases in students spending time interacting (increasing from 33% to 36%) or partnering with staff (40% to 42%) – areas in which engagement levels have traditionally been low.

These increases are encouraging given that collaborating with staff has been identified as a key driver of skills development.

In terms of skills, results show a clear increase in students reporting the development of soft skills during their time at university. These include developing personal values (increasing from 63% to 67%), understanding others (65% to 68%), how to become an active citizen (58% to 61%), and how to explore complex real world problems (66% to 68%).

Against this, however, reported development of career skills has again fallen, and is now recognised by just under half of undergraduates (49%), although levels of development are much higher among students domiciled outside the UK and those in their final year.

UK domiciled students of Black and Chinese ethnicity engage strongly in learning activities across the board, and also report development of a wide variety of skills at relatively high levels, underlining a clear correlation between engagement and skills.

The results among Black students in particular provide a clear counterpoint to a range of data produced at sector level in recent years, which has pointed towards lower achievement levels. More positively, UKES shows that these students are committing to their learning and recognising where they gain skills.

Analysis of the number of hours being spent in curricular and extra-curricular activity reveals some significant trends. Study time – both scheduled and independent – has fallen significantly in the past year. However, there has been a clear increase over each of the past two years in the number of students spending time in paid work (increasing from 45% to 52%) and caring (19% to 24%), balanced by a decline in participation in sports and/or societies (falling from 60% to 54%).

These trends are potentially significant for future levels of skills development, in that participation in sports and societies, which is in decline, appears to have a stronger impact on skills – including career skills – than working for pay, which is on the increase.

UKES has seen a significant increase in participation for 2017, up to 42 institutions, which provides evidence of its growing influence as a core tool for measurement and enhancement of undergraduate learning and teaching.

1 Background

1.1 Content and process

The UK Engagement Survey (UKES) is run by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in partnership with participating institutions. Developed under license from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in the United States, UKES provides results to drive enhancement of the undergraduate experience. 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 then be combined with data measuring 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 as much as hoped.

The questions have remained consistent since the survey was first launched in 2015. There are seven broad engagement sections (29 question items in total), 12 items covering skills development (covering academic, career and soft skills), and sections measuring time spent on academic work (two question items) and extra-curricular activity (five question items).¹ In order to limit the questionnaire length and leave space for institutional questions if required, several sections of UKES are provided to institutions as optional, although a high volume of responses was achieved across the board.

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

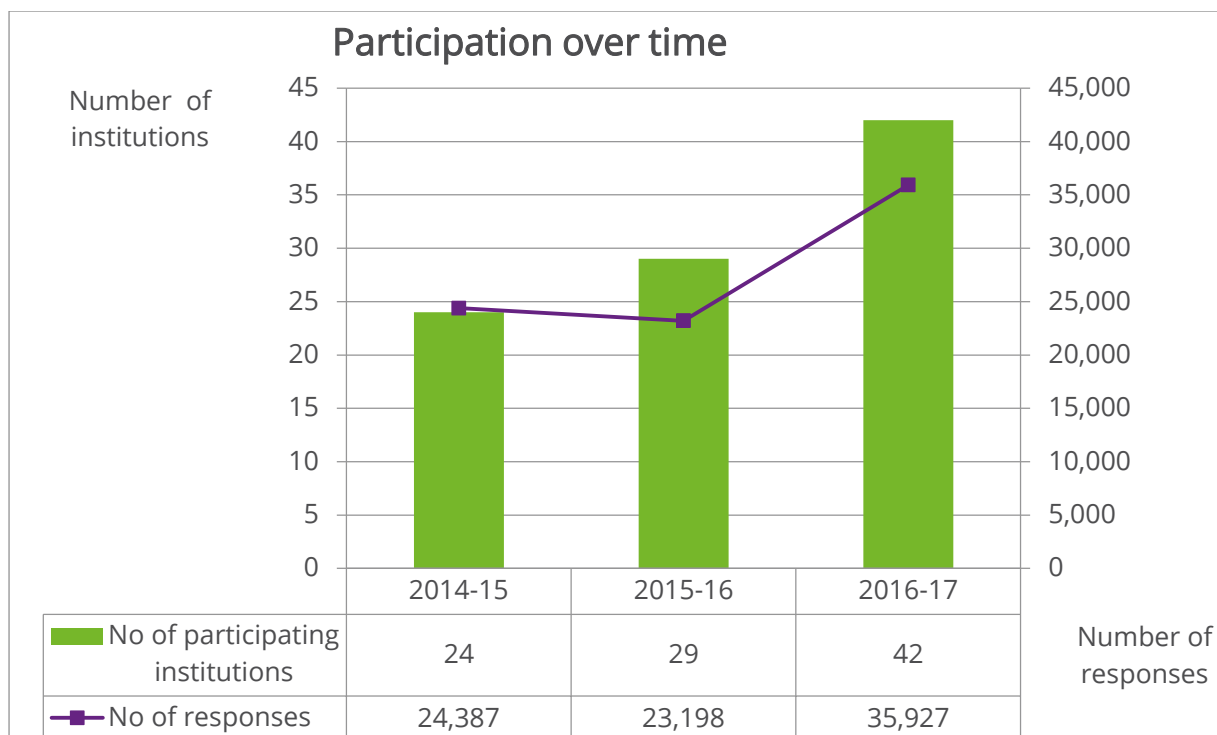
Status	Theme	Question area	Items	2017 national responses (minimum) ²
Core	Engagement	Critical thinking	4	35,927
Core	Engagement	Learning with others	4	35,941
Core	Engagement	Interacting with staff	6	35,913
Core	Engagement	Reflecting, connecting	6	35,868
Core	Engagement	Course challenge/ independent learning	2	35,993
Optional	Engagement	Engagement with research and inquiry	4	29,336
Optional	Engagement	Staff/student partnerships	3	32,142
Optional	Skills development	Academic, career, personal development	12	34,660
Optional	Time spent	Academic work	2	32,622
Optional	Time spent	Extra-curricular activity	5	32,391

As with the rest of the HEA survey portfolio, institutional results are treated as confidential, feeding into internal enhancement activities. The HEA provides a range of grouped benchmarking comparison services in order for participating institutions to compare the results of their students relative to others, which can help pinpoint where they need to improve.

1.2 Participation

In 2017, as UKES became more established, there was a strong and encouraging increase in participation across the sector, rising from 29 to 42 institutions, together with a significant increase in the volume of participation across undergraduates of all years.

² Responses vary slightly per question as individual questions in each section are not compulsory.



There are a number of regular participants, as well as an encouraging number of institutions that took part in 2017 for the first time (marked with an asterisk in the table below).

2017 Participants	
Anglia Ruskin University*	University of Bath
Bath Spa University	University of Bedfordshire*
Birmingham City University	University of Bradford
Buckinghamshire New University*	University of Central Lancashire*
Canterbury Christ Church University	University of Chichester
Cardiff Metropolitan University	University of Cumbria
Goldsmiths, University of London	University of East Anglia*
Keele University*	University of Essex*
King's College London*	University of Greenwich
Liverpool John Moores University	University of Leicester
London Metropolitan University*	University of Portsmouth*
London School of Business and Management*	University of Reading
Middlesex University London	University of Roehampton*
Norwich University of the Arts*	University of St Mark & St John
Nottingham Trent University*	University of Sunderland*
Sheffield Hallam University	University of Wales Trinity Saint David
SOAS, University of London*	University of West London
St Mary's University, Twickenham	University of Winchester
Teesside University*	University of Wolverhampton*
University College Birmingham*	University of Worcester*
University of Aberdeen	York St John University

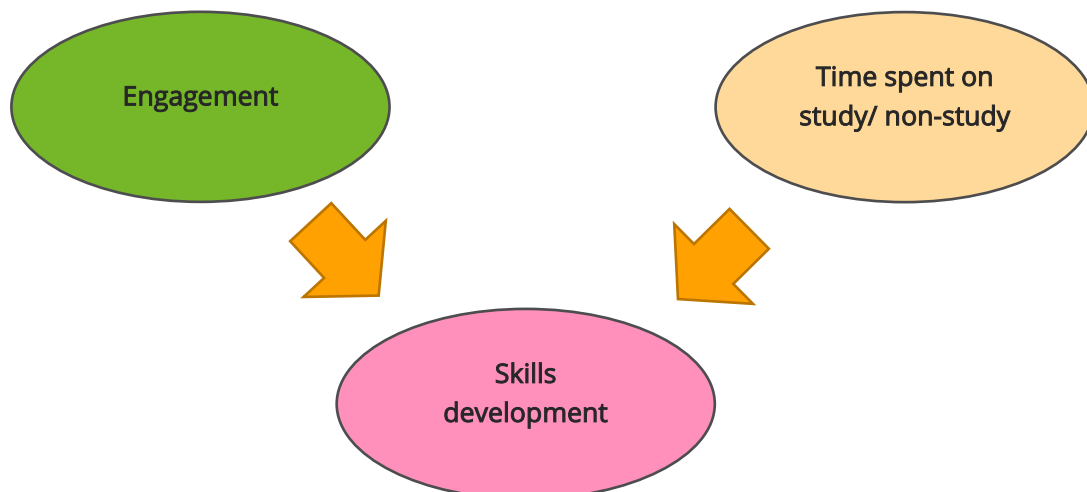
There are currently seven standard benchmarking groups within UKES, while the HEA also offers the facility for institutions to choose their own custom benchmarks.

Standard UKES benchmarking groups	
Pre-92	Million+
Post-92	Universities Alliance
London	Guild HE
	Cathedrals Group

1.3 How results are reported

As outlined above, there are three main 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 identifies key demographic differences.

A further level of analysis has been conducted to bring the different sections together – specifically to highlight how time spent, and engagement, links through to skills development.

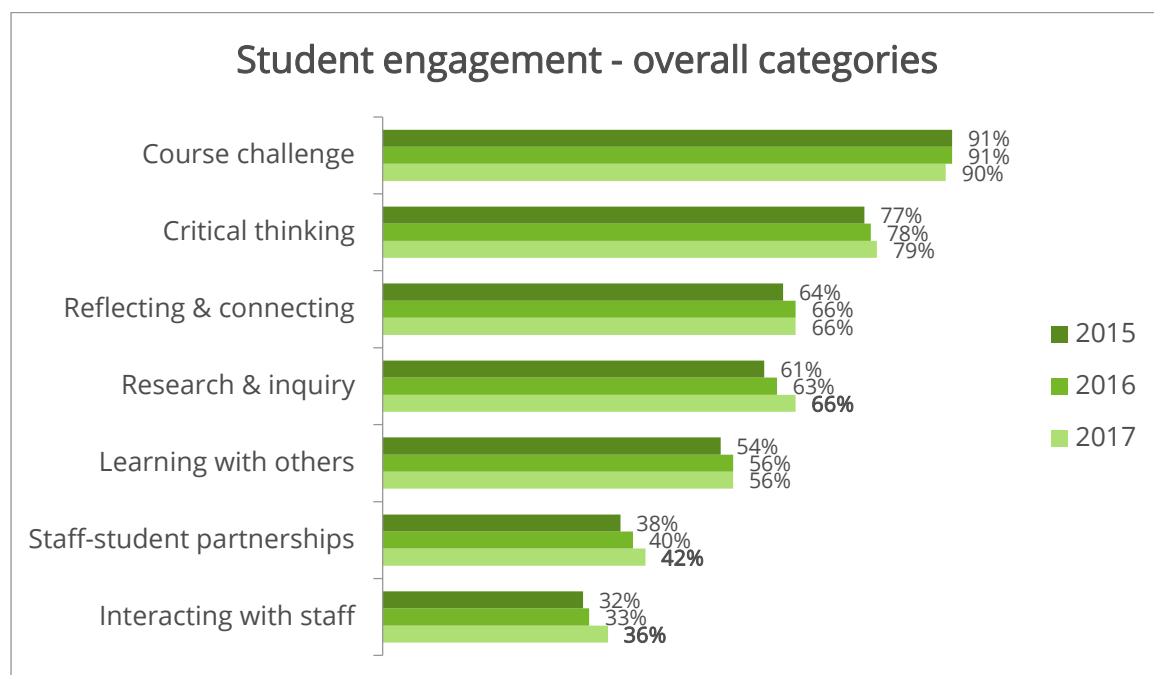


2 Engagement in learning

With a national survey such as UKES, featuring large sample sizes, we would not necessarily expect to find many major differences year on year: the results provide a picture of the nature of UK undergraduate studies which we do not always expect to change significantly at national level. Instead, the focus of reporting at national level is typically around the relative differences between aspects covered within the survey, and between different student cohorts. That said, however, now that there are three full years of data, we are able to highlight some interesting differences over time.

Overall, as we have seen before, a large proportion of students tend to feel challenged by their course (generally seen as a good thing), and spend time engaging in aspects of critical thinking and reflecting. At the other end of the scale, engagement with other students, or working with members of staff, happens much less frequently, which could be cited as a missed opportunity.

Although the broad picture of areas of high and low engagement in 2017 differs little from previous years, the data provide evidence of an upward trend in specific areas, most notably in the proportion of students engaging with staff – previously identified as a key area for focus due to its strong links with skills development.



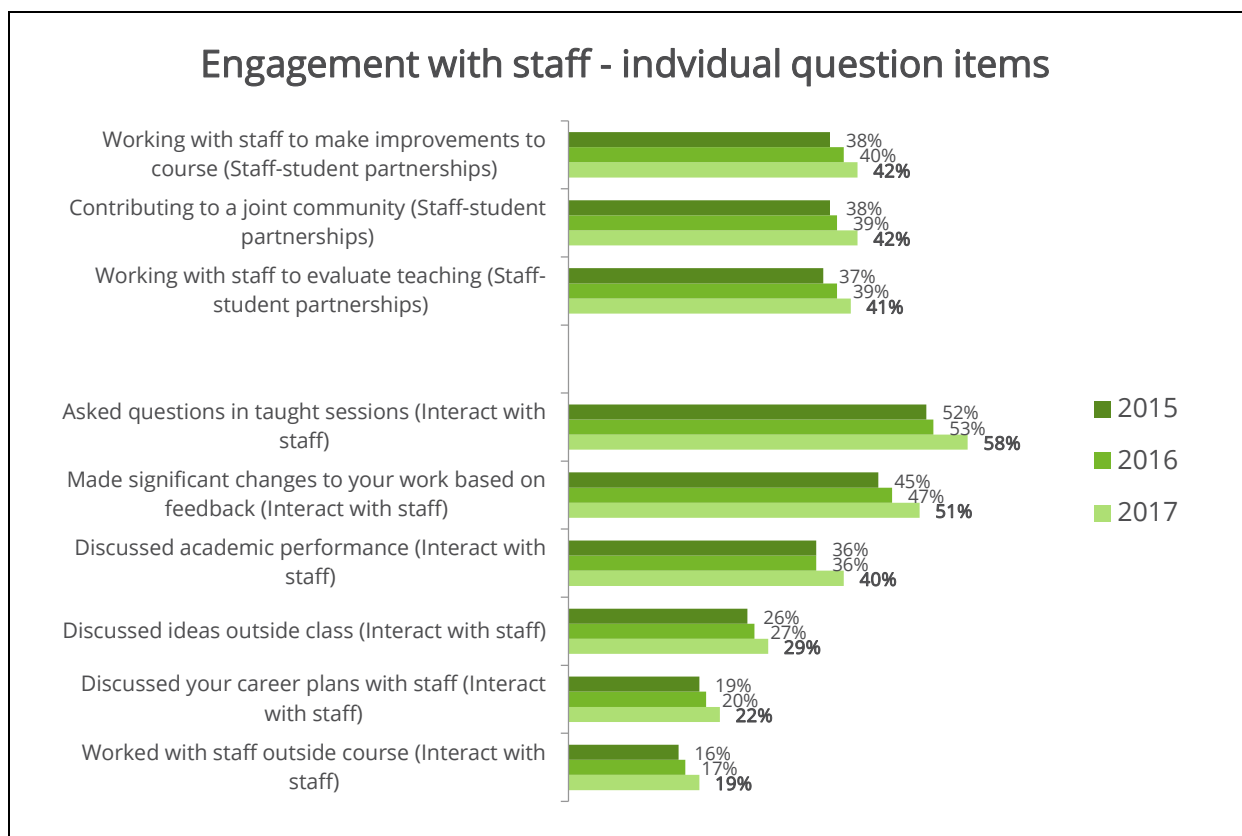
Base: All respondents per section. Percentages represent summed average of those who engage very much/quite a bit across each individual question items within each engagement category. Main year on year changes are in bold.

On average, 42% of students work with staff in partnership, an encouraging increase of two percentage points each year since 2015, while 36% on average spend time interacting with staff, up 3% in the past year.

If we consider UKES as a vehicle for highlighting where universities need to make changes, then these increases represent real progress.

2.1 Engagement with staff

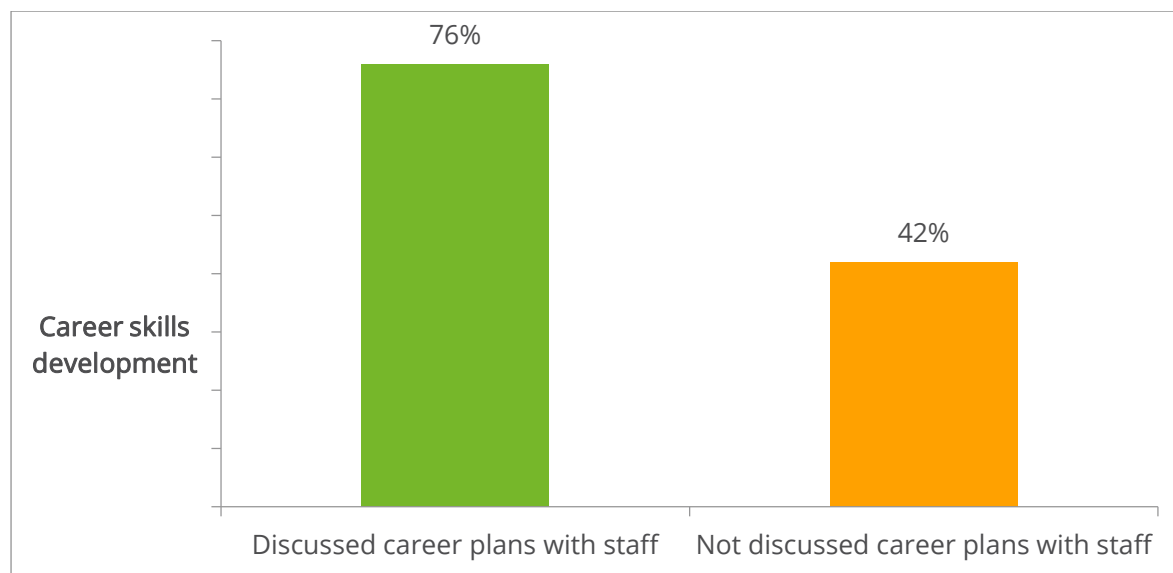
As highlighted in the introduction, each overall engagement category comprises a number of individual questions. When we drill down within the staff partnerships and staff interaction sections (areas shown in the previous chart as having with large rises) we can see a range of year-on-year increases across all of the individual question items that make up each category.



Base: All respondents per question; 2015 (20,388 minimum); 2016 (17,496); 2017 (32,142).

Given the increase across the categories overall, we would expect to see a rise in the individual question items. However the fact that almost all of the items show growth across each of the last two years is striking evidence of a clear change in the extent to which students are taking advantage of the benefits of collaborating, by working with academic staff, and gaining skills as a result of doing so. In particular, there is evidence of students becoming more involved, by asking questions in class (an increase of 6% across two years), and taking feedback into account by making changes to their work (a rise of 6%).

Discussing career plans with staff was identified through analysis in the 2016 report³ as being the single item with the strongest statistical link to students developing career skills, so it is encouraging to see the consistent increase here. Indeed we can see from the chart below, using simple comparison analysis, how students who have taken the opportunity to discuss plans with staff show a high propensity to have gained career skills (76%), compared to those who have not (42%).



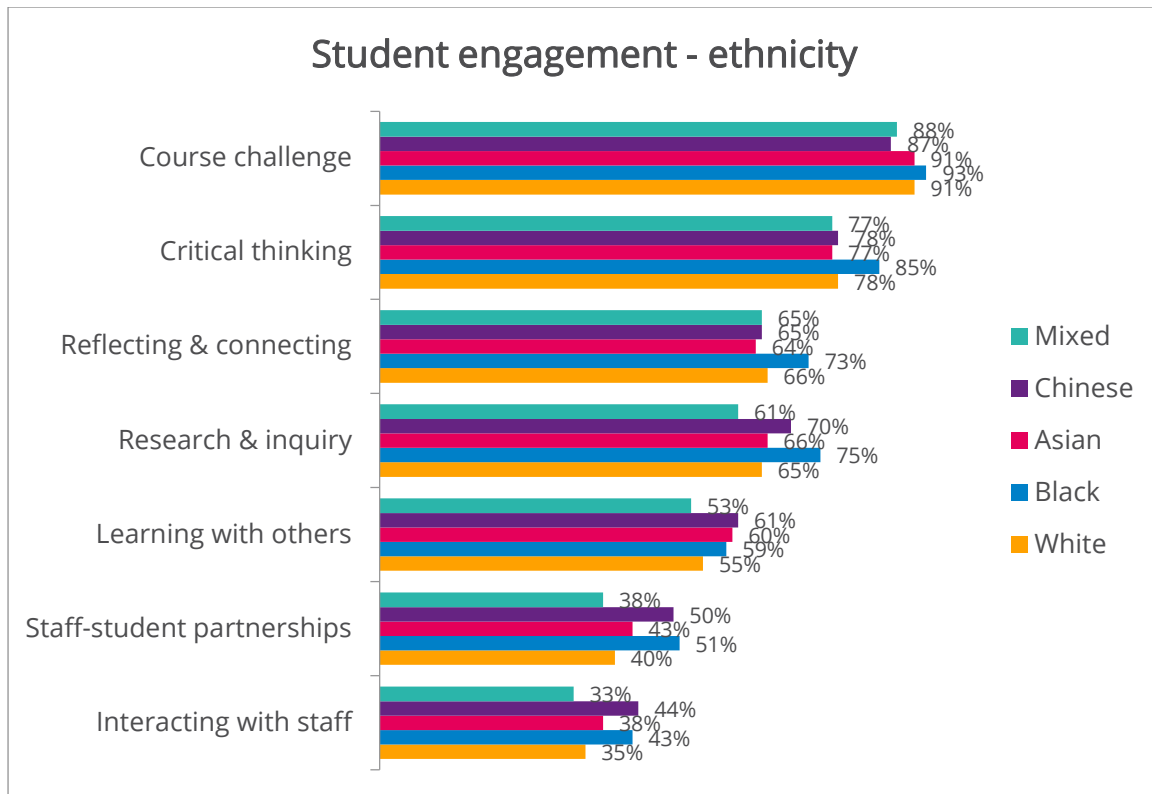
Base: Discussed career plans with staff (7,746); not discussed career plans with staff (27,599).

2.2 How engagement differs by ethnicity

It is striking how students of different ethnic backgrounds⁴ engage in their learning in different ways. Across all main engagement sections, Black students and Chinese students engage strongly, including interacting with staff, where levels are still low (although increasing) among students overall. Asian students (not including Chinese) engage at average levels, while students of mixed ethnicity engage at the lowest levels overall.

³ Neves, J. (2016). *Student engagement and skills development: the UK Engagement Survey*. York: HEA.

⁴ All ethnicity analysis in this report is based on UK domiciled students only.



Base: All UK domicile; Mixed (1,235); Chinese (1,060); Asian (3,368); Black (2,924); White (26,152).

White students make up a large proportion of the sample and hence strongly influence the overall scores. Levels of challenge for White students are high, but the results also suggest that they spend significantly less time reflecting on their work or interacting with staff compared to Black and Chinese students.

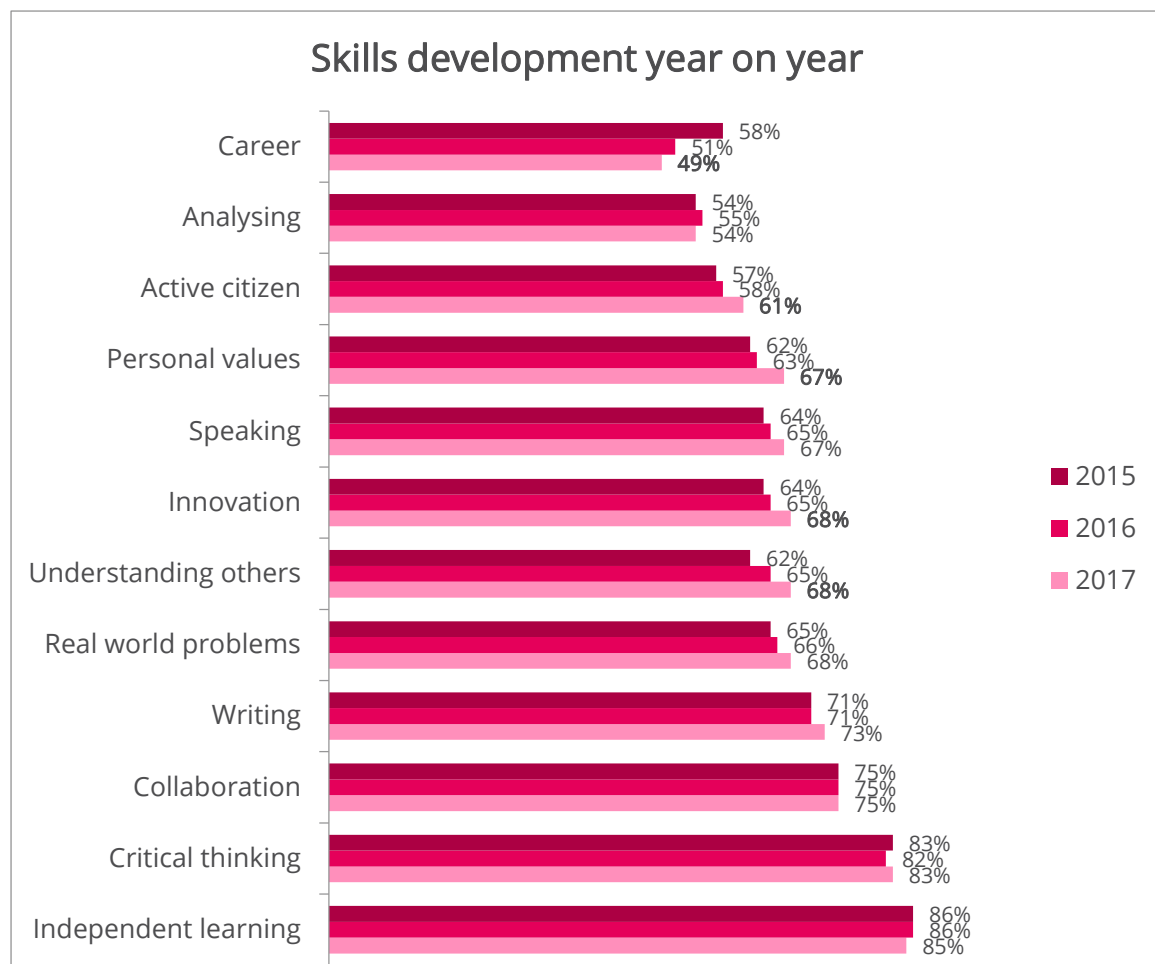
3 Skills development

In addition to measuring engagement in learning, UKES also features a section where students are asked to appraise their own skills development during their time at university.

This is a key area that can contribute to the measurement of 'learning gain' as the results help us to understand where skills, albeit self-reported, are developing, and through further analysis, what is impacting on this development.

Twelve skills items are measured, covering a range of areas ranging from the more traditionally academic skills such as critical thinking, reading and writing, to softer skills that are key to wider development such as working with others, developing personal values and being an informed and active citizen.

There is another key area measured which arguably does not fall into either broad category – career skills – worded specifically as skills to help get a job such as CV writing or career planning.



Base: All respondents. Ranking in reverse order of 2017 scores. Major year-on-year changes in bold.

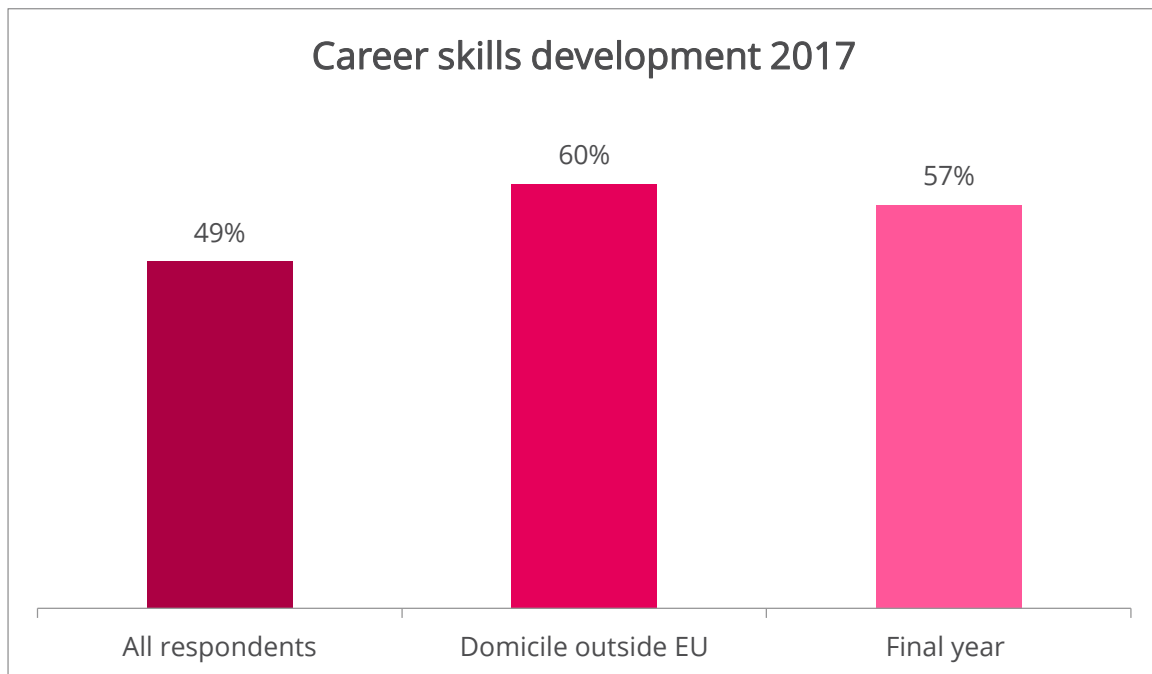
At an overall level, skills development as recognised by the students themselves appears to be on the increase. Several of the core academic skills such as independent learning and critical thinking remain high (but have not necessarily increased), but many of the softer skills show clear increases over the past year or two. For example, developing personal values has increased by 4% up to 67%, while understanding others has increased 6% over the past two years. There have also been strong increases in students feeling they have learned how to become an active citizen, and how to explore complex real-world problems.

These increases at a national level are encouraging, particularly as they showcase how students feel they are developing skills across the board, complementing academic skills with advances in softer skills.

The one exception to the trends on skills development is the decline in the proportion of students who are acquiring career skills, which has fallen from 51% last year to 49% this year. Although this does not purport to be a measure of employability, the low scores, and the decline, on this particular measure are a potential concern, as they go against the other trends in the skills development section.

3.1 Career skills development

Although development of career skills is relatively low, there are some demographic groups where results are a lot more positive.



Base: All respondents (35,460); outside EU (2,203); final year (3,215).

As we have found in previous years, results from non-EU students stand out in a positive light, representing a good case study as to how they get the most out of the university experience. In the case of final year students, we would expect there to be more focus on career issues at this stage in their studies, among the students themselves as well as their universities, and these results provide strong evidence of this.

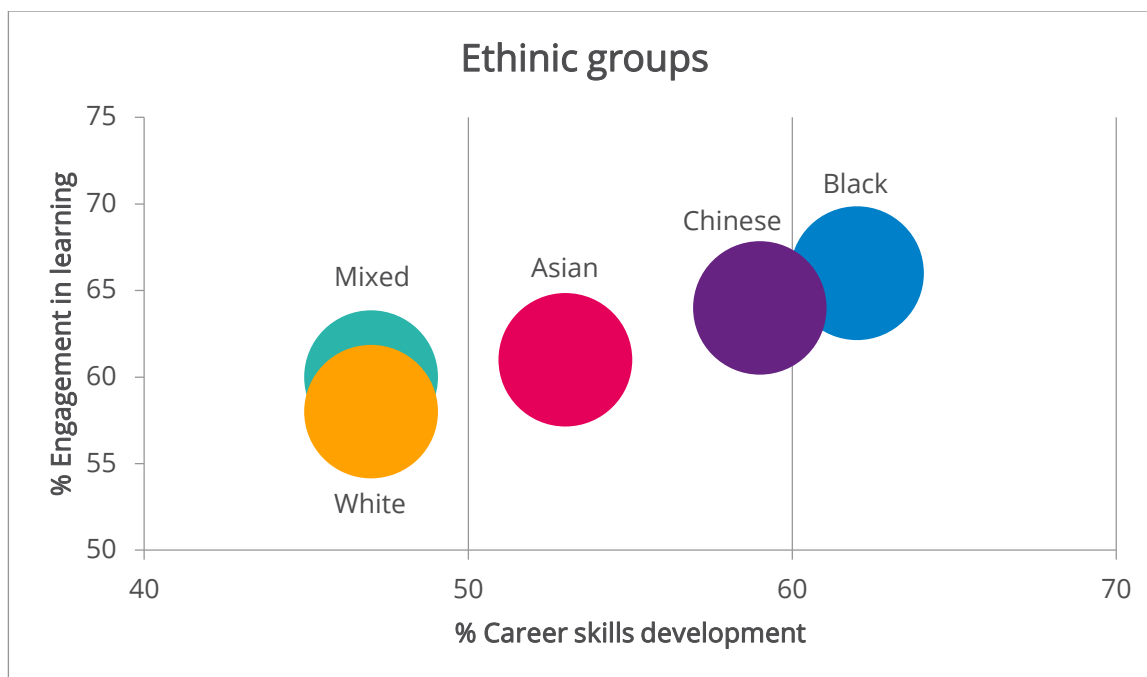
These findings do not necessarily mean that these demographic groups have been exposed to more career-based advice or content, but instead may signify how some students are more able than others to recognise the career-related benefit of how they have been spending their time. In many cases, it may be several years later when students are able to fully appreciate the range of development they underwent while at university.

Another interesting angle to this data is that the two groups highlighted here – non-EU and final year students – are also much more likely to interact and work with staff than the total sample, providing further evidence of a clear link between engaging in learning (particularly with staff) and developing career skills.

Engagement category	All respondents (35,460)	Domicile outside EU (2,203)	Final year (3,847)
Interacting with staff	36%	42%	45%
Staff-student partnerships	42%	48%	46%

3.2 Career skills and engagement – spotlight on ethnicity differences

In the previous section we have seen how students of non-White ethnicity (with the exception of mixed ethnicity students) are more likely to engage in their learning. Taking this data and combining it with results for career skills development enables us to see how the two areas correlate.



Engagement in learning calculated as a mean average of agreement scores across all core engagement sections (critical thinking/learn with others/interact with staff/reflect and connect/course challenge).

What is visually apparent is how engagement and skills development appear to be linked. Ethnic groups with high engagement in learning tend to report high development of skills – in this case, career skills, but there is a similar story for the several other skills items in the survey (not charted here).

Results among Black students are particularly encouraging, representing a positive difference compared to the student cohort overall, and providing further evidence of how these students feel relatively engaged and recognise benefits from their learning – despite wider concerns about the Black attainment gap.⁵

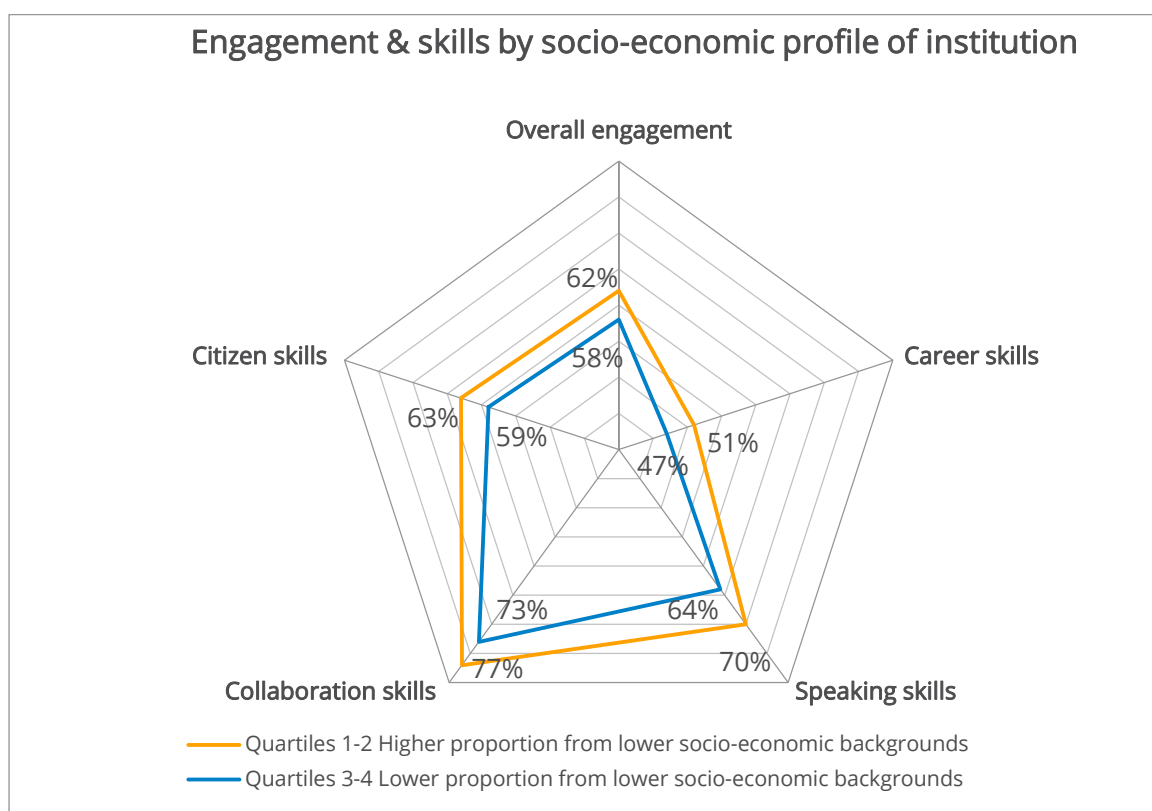
There is similarly a positive story among Chinese students, but at the other end of the scale, students of mixed ethnicity do not appear to engage strongly in learning, or identify the same benefits from their learning as other non-white students – a finding that highlights the need for greater understanding of the issues at play for mixed ethnic groups.

⁵ Buckley-Irvine, N. (2017). "Universities' shame – unpicking the black attainment gap". *WonkHE*. Available from <http://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-universities-shame-black-attainment-gap/> (accessed 30 October, 2017).

4 Socio-economic profile

To add a new dimension to the analysis this year, we have examined the link between the socio-economic profile of institutions⁶ participating in UKES and the overall levels of engagement and skills development reported by their students.

Institutions participating in UKES were ranked into quartiles based on the profile of their student intake, and then grouped back up into two contrasting groups – those with a relatively higher proportion of students from lower employment backgrounds, and those with a relatively lower proportion.



⁶ Socio-economic profile data from Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) assessed by the Bridge Group (www.thebridgegroup.org.uk). Institutions grouped according to the percentage of their students from households with employment in lower occupational categories, defined as NS-SEC classes 4-7 (source: ONS).

Looking at key metrics comprising overall engagement (an aggregate of core engagement items) and a broad spectrum of skills (academic, career and soft skills), we see a clear and consistent difference by type of institution.

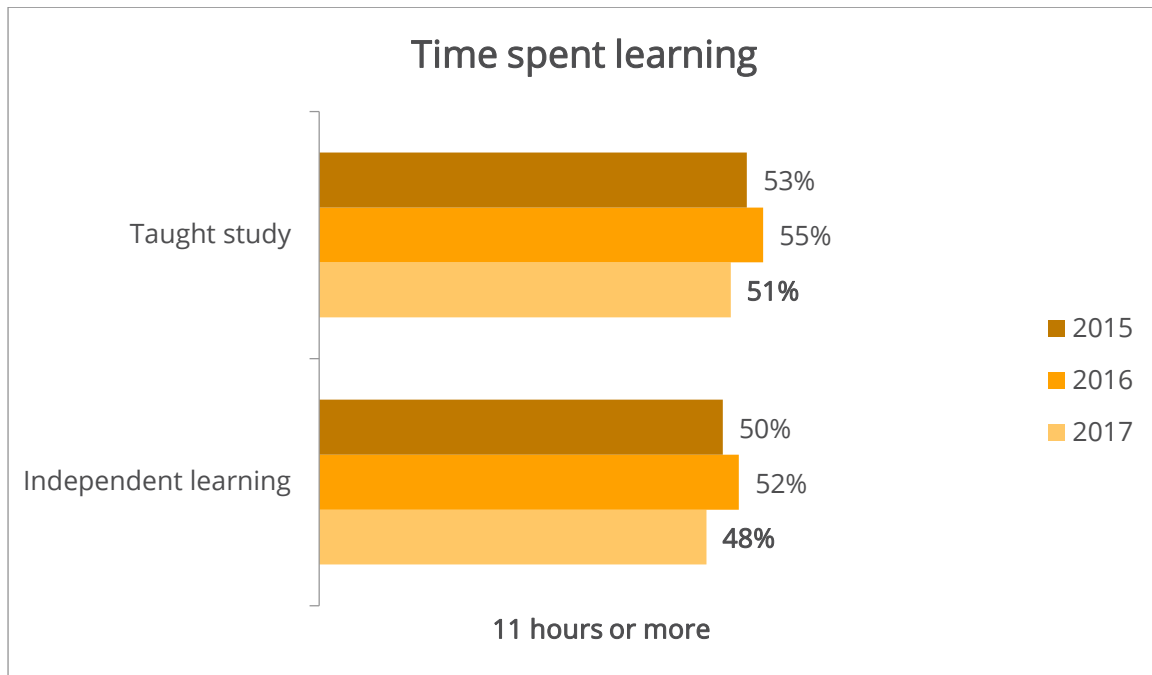
On all measures, results are clearly more positive among institutions with the strongest representation of students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, with evidence of higher overall engagement among their students and greater development of a range of skills.

These socio-economic data are based at institutional rather than student/ survey respondent level, so they do not prove a direct link between parental occupation and distance travelled via higher engagement and skills gain. However in the absence of individual-level data on socio-economic background (not collected in the survey), the inference from this data is encouraging. Combined with the results highlighted earlier in this report among different ethnic groups, these data provide a broad range of insight that points towards students from diverse backgrounds recognising clear gains during their time at university.

5 Time spent studying

5.1 Overall

Following engagement and skills development, the third main area addressed within UKES is the amount of time that students spend studying, either independently or in timetabled sessions.



Base: Taught study (32,662); independent learning (32,662). Major year-on-year changes in bold.

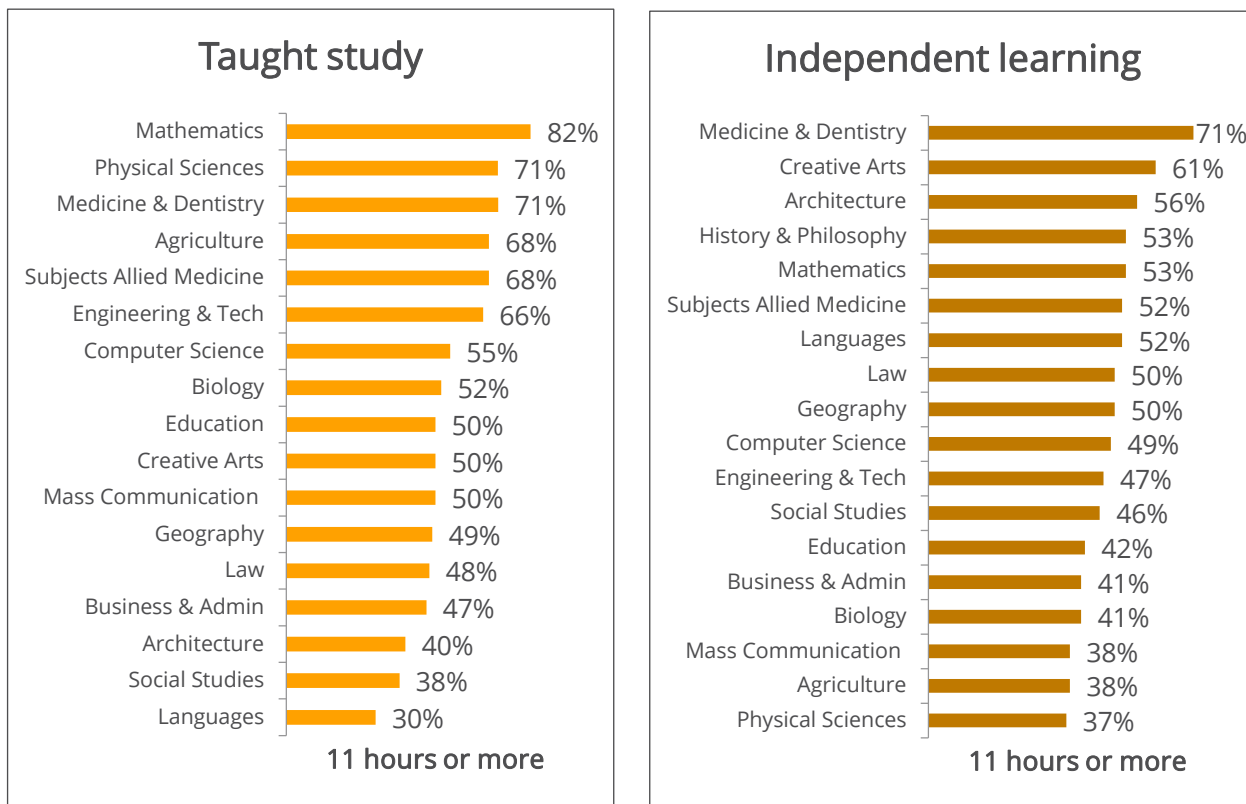
Looking at the proportion of respondents spending 11 hours or more, we see very little difference when comparing these modes of study, although slightly more students take part in taught study. However when we look at the findings across three years of UKES, we do see a striking change at national level, highlighting a reduction in volume of both types of study compared to both 2015 and 2016.

Interestingly, the decline in independent study matches the findings from the HEA-HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey 2017, which highlights a decline from a mean average of 15.2 hours in 2015 to 13.7 hours in 2017⁷.

⁷ Neves, J. & Hillman, N. (2017). *The Student Academic Experience Survey*. York; Oxford: HEA; HEPI.

5.2 By subject

As might be expected, there are significant differences in study time between subject areas.



Base: All respondents per course; Maximum – Business and Admin (4,240); Minimum – Agriculture (146).

STEM subjects such as Mathematics and Physical Sciences have the highest taught workload, while the highest volumes of independent study tend to be within Arts subjects. Interestingly, Medicine and Mathematics stand out as having high volumes of both taught classes and independent workload, while Business and Administration students report relatively low volumes of both.

5.3 Study hours and skills development

Across the 12 items of skills development we see a range of differences depending on whether or not the student has undertaken relatively high volumes (11+ hours) of study, with the general principle being that students who report high volumes of study are also more likely to report skills development. There are some skills items where taught study appears to have the greatest impact, and there are other items where independent study appears to be more significant, but it is noteworthy that for almost all skills items the data do point to a strong connection.

The chart below compares and contrasts this data, by showing the percentage point difference in development of each skill between those with 11 hours or more of workload, and those with ten hours or less. For example, there is a 3% positive difference in the development of career skills among students with 11 hours or more of taught study (51% – not shown in the chart), compared to those with ten hours or less (48%).

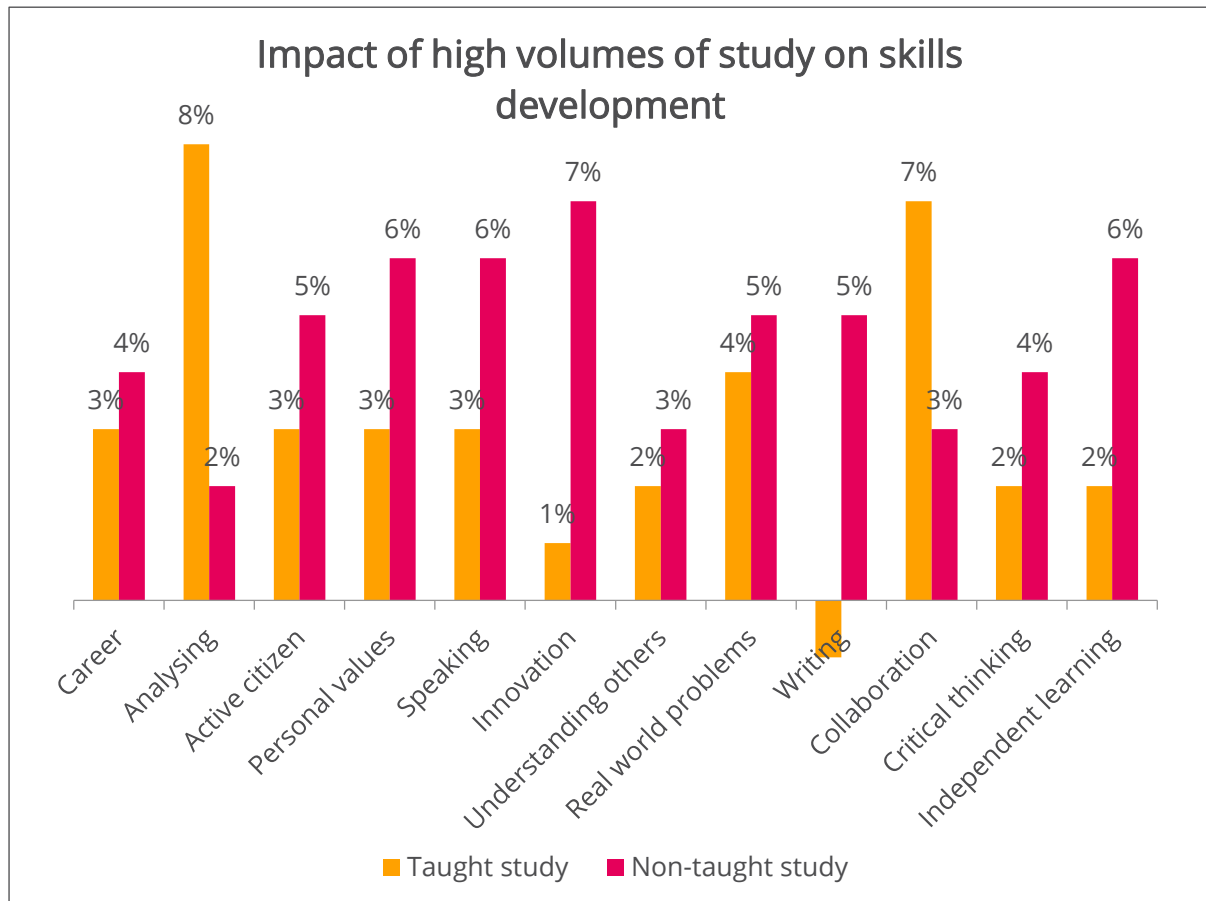
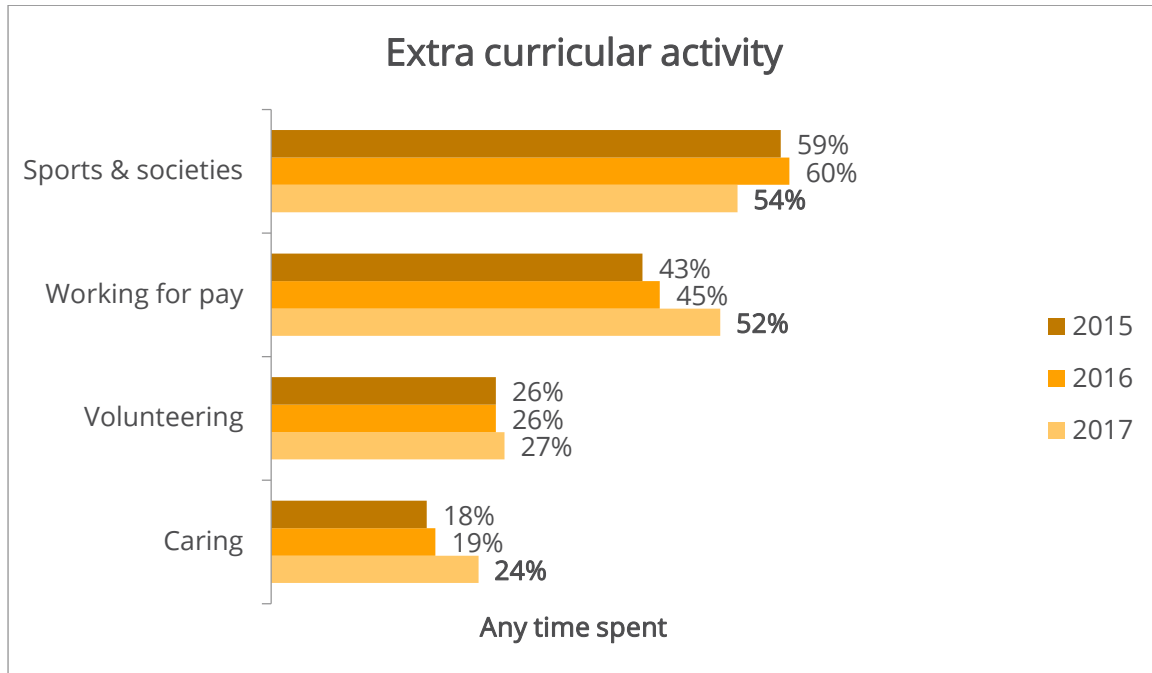


Chart shows the percentage difference in skills development between students with 11 or more hours of study (taught or non-taught) compared to students with 11 hours or less.

High volumes of taught study have strong links in particular to the development of analysis skills and, understandably, to collaboration. By contrast independent study appears to link strongest to some of the softer skills such as innovation, developing personal values and becoming an active citizen. Across many items, it is notable that independent study appears to lead to more of a difference in development than taught study.

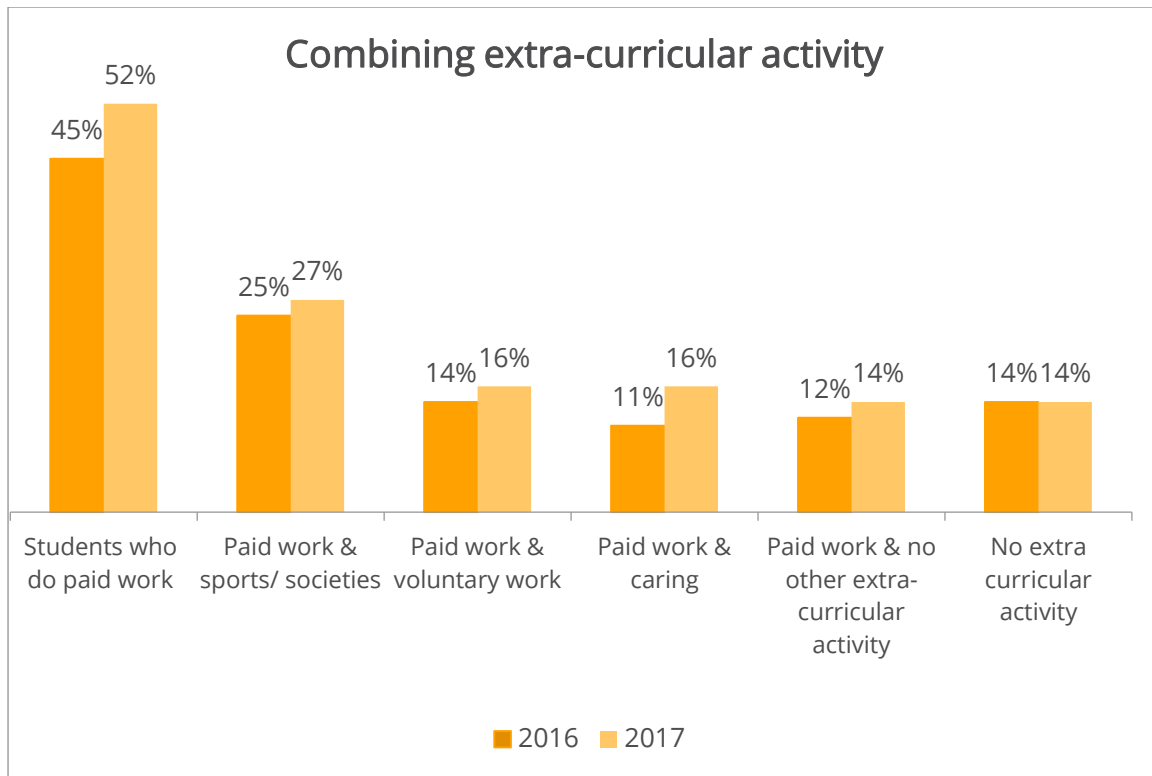
6 Extra-curricular interests and responsibilities

As well as measuring the time spent studying, UKES also measures how students spend their time across a range of extra-curricular activities.



Base: All respondents answering each question; Sports (32,419); Working (32,572); Volunteering (32,391); Caring (32,542). Major year on year changes in bold.

What is striking from the year on year scores, is that time spent participating in sports and/or societies appears to be declining, while time spent undertaking responsibilities such as working for pay or caring is increasing. Against a backdrop of declining time spent studying (highlighted in the previous section), these data present an interesting picture of the demands on students time, and how this may be impacting on how students manage these competing demands.



Base: All answering 'paid work' question; 2016 (16,235); 2017 (32,572). 'No activity' comprises students who do not do any paid work, sports, voluntary work or caring.

In the context of increasing paid work, a potential concern is the reduction of the time available to spend on other activities while balancing study commitments. What is interesting from the above chart, however is that a sizeable number of students are still managing to combine different types of extra-curricular activity. For example, we know paid work has increased, but the proportion of students doing paid work alongside other activities has also increased. This is notable in that, as we will see below, different types of activity contribute to the development of different types of skills, so to see students continue to find time for more than one type of activity is encouraging.

6.1 Extra-curricular activity and skills development

Using the same analysis as in the previous section, but now focusing on extra-curricular activity rather than study activity, we can identify the relative impact of the different types of activities on the 12 skills development items in UKES.

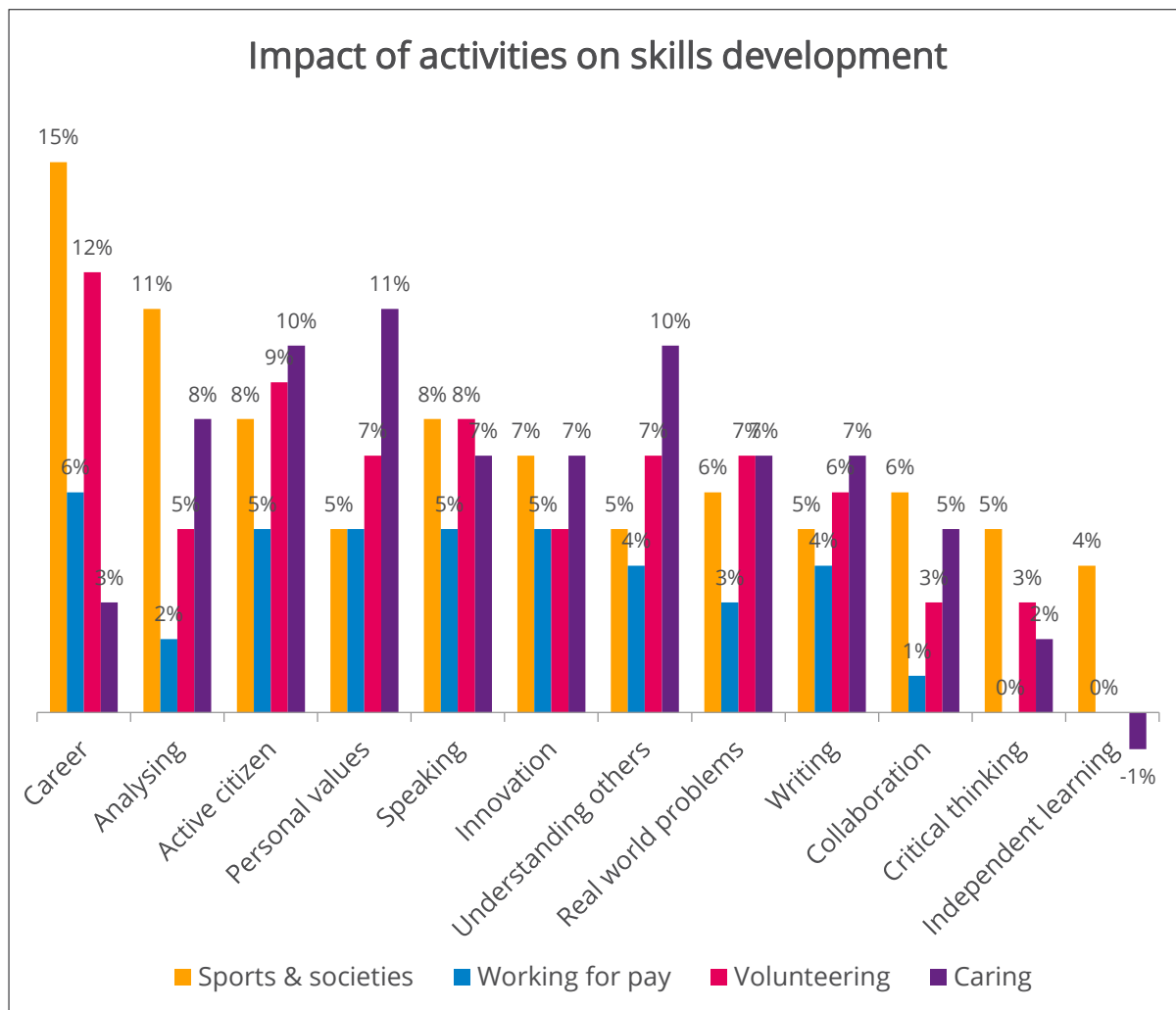


Chart shows the percentage difference in development of each skill between students who participated in each activity compared to students who did not participate at all.

As might be expected, different activities have an impact on different kinds of skills, but the overall comparison is notable.

It is significant that some of the most 'academic' skills such as critical thinking and independent learning are not particularly impacted by non-study activity – although as section 5 showed, they are impacted by independent study. However, there is clear evidence of the benefit of these non-study activities on career skills and many of the softer skills items.

For the key aspect of career skills, involvement in sports and societies appears to have a major impact, with a 15% difference between those who have participated (56% of these students developed career skills) and those who did not (just 41% developed career skills). On a more general level, caring responsibilities can lead to strong uplifts in more civic skills such as being an active citizen, developing personal values and understanding others, while volunteering has a positive impact across several skills areas such as career skills, speaking and understanding real-world problems.

The one main activity we have not yet highlighted as having a clear positive link is working for pay. Although a necessity for many students (carried out by 52% of UKES participants and increasing), there is growing evidence from UKES results in both 2016 and 2017 that working for pay while at university does not help to develop skills as strongly as the other activities assessed here. The relative impacts on softer skills are small, while there appears to be little or no impact on some of the academic skills items. A potential inference from this is that students who work for pay are often in lower skilled jobs, but it is significant that the data points towards volunteering in many cases having more of a rounded skills benefit.

7 Key considerations for the sector

Although the results from UKES 2017 are positive in many ways, this report does highlight a range of issues for further consideration and debate across the sector:

1. UKES provides a more positive view of the development of UK domiciled Black students than is often reported across the sector. These findings provide a clear prompt for sector agencies to collaborate and share data in order to understand why Black students engage in their learning on the one hand, but experience lower achievement levels on the other. Unpicking these issues would create a greater opportunity to address them.
2. The benefits of students engaging and collaborating with staff are clear. The strong increases over time provide evidence of good practice across the sector in identifying this as a priority. Moving forward, there should be a continued focus on creating opportunities for students to work with staff, as well as communicating to both staff and students how this can lead to tangible gains in development.
3. Measuring career skills development among current students is challenging, and far from an exact science. However the relatively low scores reported, together with the declines over time, highlight an opportunity for institutions to focus more resources in demonstrating how students' academic experience is helping to develop skills that will contribute strongly to their employability further down the line.
4. There is increasing evidence of students having to take on significant responsibilities outside the classroom, in the form of paid work, which may not be leading to optimum skills gain. Institutions face a challenge to maximise the support to these students, ensuring that they still have access to a range of extra-curricular activity as well as being able to manage their study commitments.
5. In the context of a significant rise in participation, UKES has shown that it can provide a nuanced and thought provoking picture of the factors that impact on how students develop, both at national and institutional level. Moving forward, institutions that choose to take part in UKES will have the opportunity to access a rich variety of data with the potential to drive real enhancements in how students are encouraged and supported to spend their time.

8 Appendix 1: Sample profile

8.1 Demographics

Category	Characteristic	Responses	UKES 2017
Gender	Male	11,552	32%
	Female	24,401	68%
Age	21 and under	23,221	65%
	22–25	5,044	14%
	26+	7,224	20%
Fee status	UK	30,969	86%
	EU	2,801	8%
	Non-EU	2,228	6%
Ethnicity (UK domicile)	White	23,462	76%
	Non-White	3,993	24%
Mode	Full-time	34,081	95%
	Part-time	1,951	5%
Year	Foundation	1,595	4%
	1	17,121	48%
	2	12,974	36%
	3+	3,937	11%
Delivery mode	Face to face	33,444	94%
	Distance	2,317	6%

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

8.2 Institutions

Category	Characteristic	Responses	UKES 2017
Type	Pre-92	6894	19%
	Post-92	28616	79%
	Small and specialist	555	2%
Mission* group	Million +	10,462	29%
	Universities Alliance	9,460	26%
	Guild HE	3,810	10%
	Cathedrals Group	7,514	21%
	London	4,805	13%
	Other	2,148	6%

*Percentages add up to more than 100% as groups are not mutually exclusive.

8.3 Subjects

Category	Subject	Responses	UKES 2017
Cluster	Health	6,297	18%
	STEM	9,647	28%
	Social Sciences	12,147	35%
	Arts and Humanities	6,619	19%
JACS Level 1	Medicine and Dentistry	636	2%
	Subjects allied to Medicine	5,652	16%
	Biological Sciences	4,648	13%
	Veterinary Sciences	9	0%
	Agriculture and Related	156	0%
	Physical Sciences	759	2%
	Geographical Studies	455	1%
	Mathematical Sciences	391	1%
	Computer Science	1,413	4%
	Engineering and Technology	1,245	4%
	Architecture, Building and Planning	580	2%
	Social Studies	2,872	8%
	Law	1,256	4%
	Business and Administrative Studies	4,677	13%
	Mass Communication and Documentation	1,022	3%
	Languages	1,306	4%
	Historical and Philosophical Studies	1,014	3%
	Creative Arts and Design	3,277	9%
	Education	3,342	10%

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