2019
UK Engagement Survey

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AdvanceHE

UK
ENGAGEMENT
SURVEY

Contents

1. Executive Summary

The UK Engagement Survey (UKES) first launched in 2015. In the 2019 survey, we see that levels of engagement by students are higher than in 2015. This is across what continues to be a robust undergraduate sample with a largely consistent participation base. Since 2018 there has been a small decline in some areas, but earlier gains have been maintained in terms of students' engagement in research and inquiry, and critical thinking.

From this year's survey, we see that partnering and interacting with staff is key to helping students develop their skills. The 2019 UKES provides new, additional analysis, which also highlights that these activities are linked to high levels of retention. However, students do not tend to engage in these activities to any great extent, despite some recent increases. Therefore, we see that any boost in the numbers of students partnering and interacting with staff has potential to have a positive impact on the development of students.

In terms of skills development, there is real evidence of a greater focus on the more developmental, softer skills, with a range of these skills increasing consistently across UKES participants over the past 5 years. Not all of the more academic skills have developed to the same extent but, in some cases, these were relatively high with less potential for improvement.

Development of career skills continues to be relatively low. However, this is at least partly explained by the high proportion of first-and second-year students participating in UKES. There is also evidence that development of this skill accelerates significantly by the third year of study.

Study time appears to be in decline, with the proportion of students spending 11 hours or more per week declining consistently over the past few years for both taught and independent learning. Although any decline in time spent studying is potentially cause for concern, it is given greater resonance by analysis this year which identifies how independent learning in particular can link to the development of a wide range of skills.

There is positive evidence that students still recognise the importance of a range of extra-curricular activities, and indeed this year there has been an increase in participation in sports and societies, as well as a halt in the previous increase in the number of students spending time working for pay. As well as volunteering and – in some aspects – caring, sports and societies can play a major role in rounded skills development as well as potentially having a positive impact on retention. This report therefore provides a range of evidence as to why these activities should be supported.

Turning to comparison of results across different ethnic groups, we see the potentially counter-intuitive finding that while Black students engage and participate at high levels, there is wider-sector evidence of lower satisfaction and achievement rates. There is clearly a high degree of commitment to study and personal development by many Black students, and this could be investigated further as part of continuing efforts across the sector to deliver positive outcomes for all.

2. Methodology

2.1 Approach

The UK Engagement Survey is run by Advance HE in partnership with participating institutions. Developed under licence from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE)[1] in the United States, UKES provides results to help 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 and competencies – enabling institutions, and the sector overall, to focus attention on areas where students are not engaging or developing as much as hoped.

There are seven broad engagement sections (five of which are compulsory and two optional), 12 items covering skills development (optional), and sections measuring time spent on academic work (two question items – both optional) and extra-curricular activity (five question items – optional). In order to limit the questionnaire length and leave space for institutional questions, several sections of UKES are provided to institutions as optional, although a high volume of responses was achieved across the board, and is indeed to be encouraged as the optional sections contain some of the areas with potentially the most impact in terms of measuring students' development.

2.2 Content

As is the case with all Advance HE surveys, institutional results are treated as confidential, feeding into internal enhancement activities. Advance HE 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 action may be needed.

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[1] Copyright 2001–2019, The Trustees of Indiana University.

Status	Theme	Question area	Items	2019 national responses (minimum)[2]
Core	Engagement	Critical thinking	4	29,677
Core	Engagement	Learning with others	4	29,689
Core	Engagement	Interacting with staff	6	29,696
Core	Engagement	Reflecting and connecting	6	29,671
Core	Engagement	Course challenge/ independent learning	2	29,718
Optional	Engagement	Research and inquiry	4	22,056
Optional	Engagement	Staff–student partnerships	3	22,888
Optional	Skills development	Career, creative and social, learning	12	26,470
Optional	Time spent	Academic work	2	26,840
Optional	Time spent	Extra-curricular activity	5	26,825

2.3 How the questions are asked

In order to maximise how the results in this report are understood and interpreted, the specific nature of the questions is detailed below.

For example, it is important to recognise that although UKES is principally referred to as being about "engagement", it does not measure literally "how engaged students are", but instead asks students to identify the activities where they spend their time. Certain sections also ask about the activities that their course has prioritised, thereby highlighting specific areas which the institution can enhance directly if appropriate.

When it comes to skills development, instead of a direct question about the level of skills students feel they hold, the question is more nuanced, focusing on how much the overall student experience has contributed to the development of the 12 skills specified.

The questions on time spent are more direct, asking the student to estimate the number of hours spent in a typical week, within specified ranges. Instead of reporting the average number of hours (although this data is available), the data is reported here on the percentage of students that spent 11 hours or more (study activity), and the percentage of students that spent any time at all (extra-curricular activity).

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

Theme	Question area	Scale	Question type	Data reported
Engagement	Critical thinking	4 point	How much has your course emphasised activities?	Top 2 points in scale – very much/quite a bit
Engagement	Learning with others	4 point	How often have you done activities?	Top 2 points in scale – very often/often
Engagement	Interacting with staff			
Engagement	Reflecting and connecting			
Engagement	Course challenge/ independent learning	4 point	How much has your course emphasised activities?	Top 2 points in scale – very much/quite a bit
Engagement	Research and inquiry			
Engagement	Staff–student partnerships	4 point	How much have you been encouraged to do activities?	Top 2 points in scale – very much/quite a bit
Skills development	Career, creative and social, learning	4 point	How much has your overall student experience contributed?	Top 2 points in scale – very much/quite a bit
Time spent	Academic work	8 point (ranges of hours)	How many hours do you spend in a typical 7-day week?	Top 5 points in scale – 11 hours or more
Time spent	Extra-curricular activity	8 point (ranges of hours)		Top 5 points in scale – any time spent

2.4 Participation

Since its inception and first year of full operation, in 2015, UKES has become well established among those institutions with a major focus on measuring student engagement, with many regular participants.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Institutions	24	29	42	38	31
Participants	24,387	23,198	35,927	34,635	29,784
Average per institution	1,016	800	855	911	960

Participation has fallen since the peak in 2017. The UK undergraduate landscape is a crowded one for surveys, but we still have a core of institutions that build this into their schedule as a key activity year on year, prioritising the measurement of engagement and providing a large and robust sample of nearly 30,000 undergraduates.

| 2019 participants	
Brunel, University of London	University of Central Lancashire**
Buckinghamshire New University**	University of Chester*
Canterbury Christ Church University***	University of Durham
Goldsmiths, University of London***	University of East Anglia**
Hartpury University *	University of Essex**
Liverpool John Moores University****	University of Portsmouth**
Queen Mary, University of London*	University of Reading****
Royal Northern College of Music*	University of Roehampton**
Sheffield Hallam University****	University of St Mark & St John***
SOAS, University of London**	University of Sunderland**
St Mary's University, Twickenham****	University of Wales Trinity Saint David**
Teesside University**	University of West London
The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama*	University of Winchester***
University of Bedfordshire**	University of Wolverhampton**
University of Bolton*	York St John University****
University of Bradford****	
*Participated in 2018	
**Participated in both 2017 and 2018	
***Participated in 2016, 2017 and 2018	
****Participated in 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018	

2.5   How the 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. The report also features some analysis looking at links between the sections.

Engagement

Time spent on study/non-study

Skills development

3. Engagement

3.1 Overall

There are seven categories of engagement measured by UKES, comprising 29 individual question items, and with five full years of robust data, we can compare them relative to each other as well as over time.
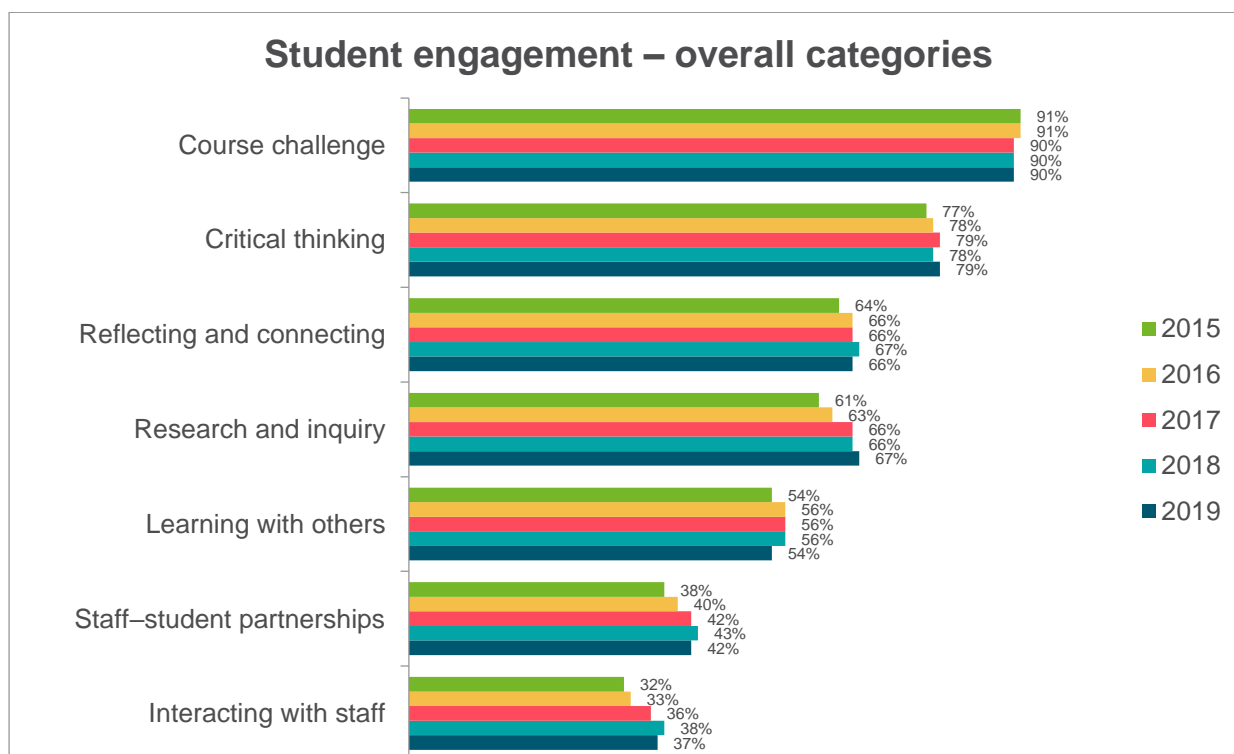
Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Results calculated as a summed average across each of the individual items within each section.

All of the aspects measured by UKES are generally acknowledged as contributing positively to how students learn and develop. Hence, in an ideal scenario, at both sector and institutional level, we would be looking for strong results across all engagement sections, ideally increasing over time.
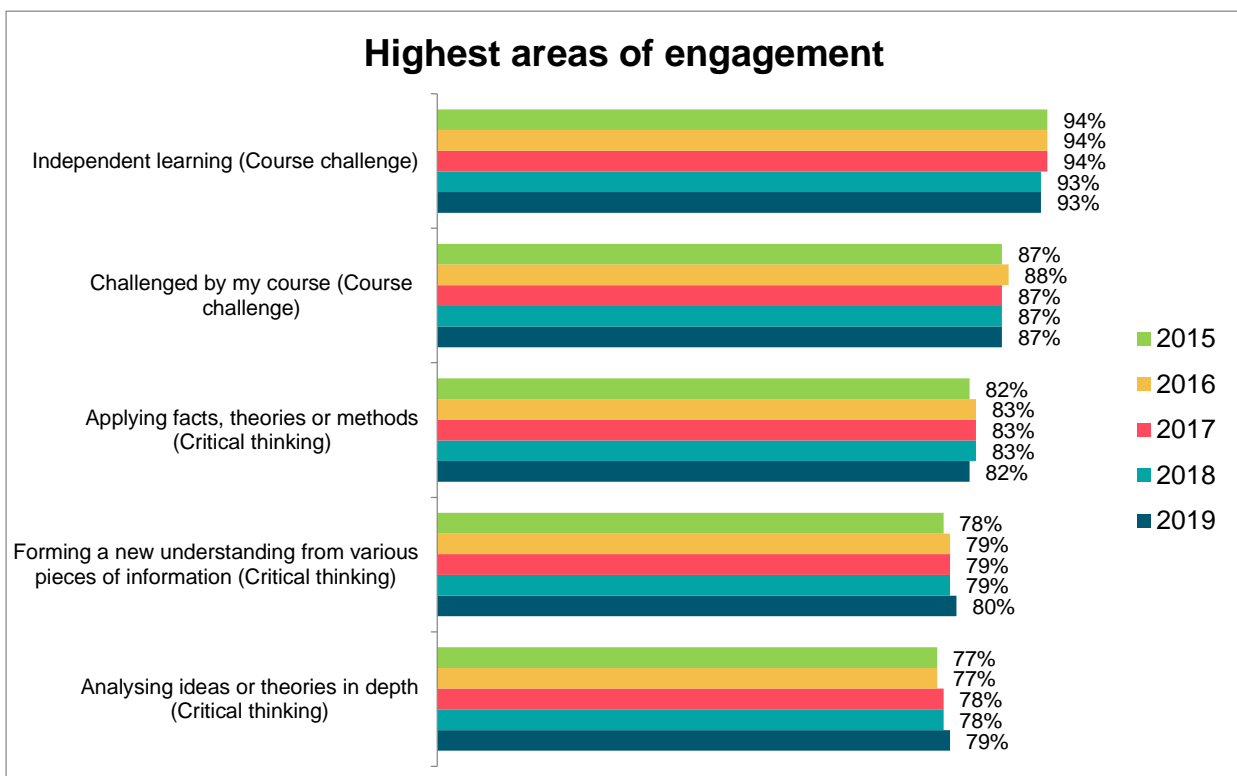
The actual results show that there remain a number of aspects that students are not engaging in significantly and/or their courses are not fully emphasising. In particular, interactions with staff and fellow students remain relatively low – which appears to be a missed opportunity around building relationships, collaborating and communicating. By comparison, there appears little doubt that students feel challenged by their course, and there is also clear evidence that students engage in critical thinking, as well as, to some extent, research and inquiry-based activity.

Looking at the results across a five-year period, it is apparent that progress has been made. With the exception of course challenge, where there was little room for increase, and learning with others, which has fluctuated little, the remaining areas of engagement all show an increase compared to 2015. We have seen earlier that UKES participation has had a consistent core of institutions and while year on year cohorts do show variation in participation, there is clear evidence that UK undergraduate students are being encouraged to focus on aspects of research and inquiry and interaction with staff and students to a greater extent in 2018 and 2019 than was the case in 2015.

Unfortunately, 2019 has not shown an increase, although the gains in previous years – particularly in 2018 – are largely maintained with only a 1% decrease in most aspects.

3.2   Areas of high and low engagement

Looking across the individual engagement items, we can see the specific areas where students engage the most.

Highest areas of engagement

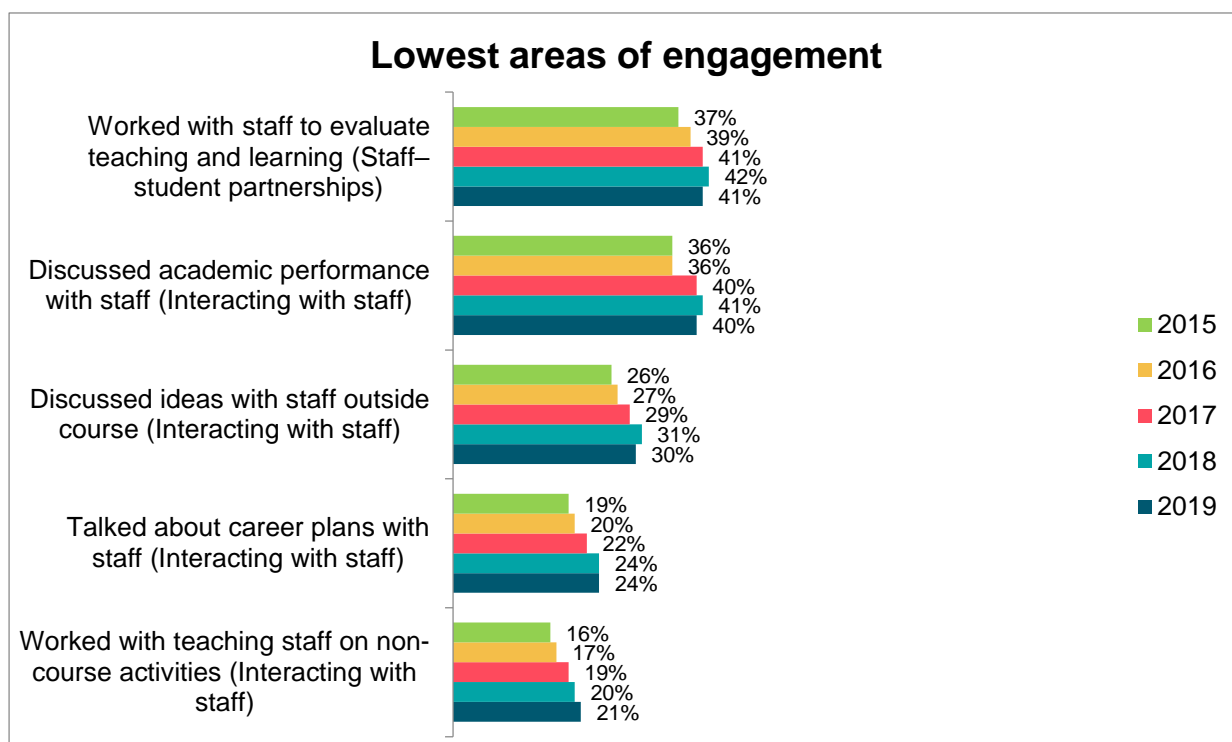|	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Independent learning (Course challenge)	94%	94%	94%	93%	93%
Challenged by my course (Course challenge)	87%	88%	87%	87%	87%
Applying facts, theories or methods (Critical thinking)	82%	83%	83%	83%	82%
Forming a new understanding from various pieces of information (Critical thinking)	78%	79%	79%	79%	80%
Analysing ideas or theories in depth (Critical thinking)	77%	77%	78%	78%	79%

Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section.

We have seen above that course challenge and critical thinking are the main aspects that are emphasised by undergraduate courses, and hence it is no surprise that the highest-scoring individual items are all within these areas. In particular, almost all students (93%) feel their course emphasises independent learning to a strong or reasonable extent. We

have seen little evidence of change over time in these areas, which is perhaps to be expected given their high scores.

In terms of lower areas of engagement, these fall within the generally low-scoring categories of interacting or partnering with staff. What is prominent from looking at the data since 2015 however is the extent of upward movement. Although scores in 2019 are in some cases 1% lower than 2018, they still represent a strong increase since 2015, implying a focus from institutions on providing more emphasis as to how working with staff can help students develop.
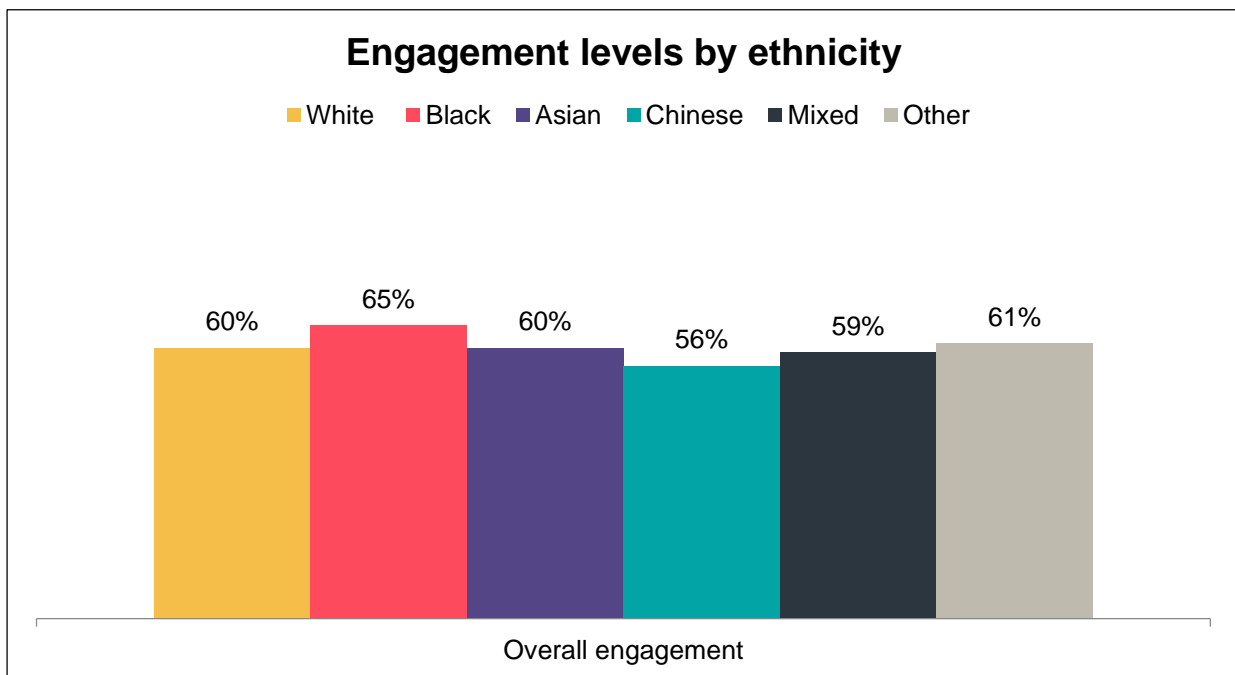

Lowest areas of engagement

Worked with staff to evaluate teaching and learning (Staff–student partnerships): 37%, 39%, 41%, 42%, 41%

Discussed academic performance with staff (Interacting with staff): 36%, 36%, 40%, 41%, 40%

Discussed ideas with staff outside course (Interacting with staff): 26%, 27%, 29%, 31%, 30%

Talked about career plans with staff (Interacting with staff): 19%, 20%, 22%, 24%, 24%

Worked with teaching staff on non-course activities (Interacting with staff): 16%, 17%, 19%, 20%, 21%

Legend: 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019

Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section.

3.3   Engagement and ethnicity

In order to compare overall levels of engagement, we have calculated a summed average across the five core categories, which we refer to here as "overall engagement". We have also provided participating institutions with benchmarked results based on this key measure.

This overall engagement measure also enables us to conduct comparative analysis as to which types of student are more, or less, likely to engage. Across the UK higher education sector there is significant focus on how the experience and achievement levels of students varies considerably depending on their ethnic background, and accordingly we have focused our analysis of UKES on the extent to which levels of engagement differ between different ethnic categories.

Engagement levels by ethnicity

■ White ■ Black ■ Asian ■ Chinese ■ Mixed ■ Other

White	Black	Asian	Chinese	Mixed	Other
60%	65%	60%	56%	59%	61%

Overall engagement

Base: UK domiciled students[3] identifying as White (19,488); Black (2,129); Asian (2,464); Chinese (165); Mixed (984); Other (465)

What stands out from this data are the high levels of engagement from Black students, and the fact that BME (Black and minority ethnic) students overall report comparatively higher or similar engagement compared to White students. Clearly, students from BME backgrounds are engaging with their course, and indeed are setting a positive example in many cases.

The results among Black students in particular are consistent with what we have found in previous years in UKES, building a consistent picture of strong engagement. As a counterpoint to this data, however, we can point towards the Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES) by Advance HE and HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute),[4] which consistently reports that students from BME backgrounds have a less positive experience than White students in terms of value for money and meeting expectations. There is also the widely reported BME attainment gap within the UK higher education sector, with Black students in particular[5] facing wide gaps in terms of the proportions that achieve higher-classification degrees compared to White students.

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[3] This analysis has been conducted based on students from the UK only, to remove the impact of overseas students on ethnic comparisons.

[4] Neves, J. and Hillman, N. (2019). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI. p.29.

[5] See for example, on English universities https://www.theguardian.com/education/2019/mar/29/english-universities-show-gaps-in-black-students-attainment-data-reveals [accessed 28/09/2019]

These data points therefore highlight a complex picture and arguably a counter-intuitive one. Black students often engage more but are more likely to attain lower-level degrees and have a less satisfactory experience, whereas the theory behind UKES and wider engagement measurement is based on high engagement being a strong predictor for high levels of learning.[6] Clearly, the issue of ethnicity and attainment within the UK sector is complex and multifaceted and cannot be explained or "solved" by simply ensuring greater levels of engagement. However, what the data does suggest is that the potential among BME students and Black students in particular to invest in their own development is significant and could potentially be harnessed more effectively.

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[6] "Survey items on The College Student Report represent empirically confirmed 'good practices' in undergraduate education. That is, they reflect behaviours by students and institutions that are associated with desired outcomes of college" http://nsse.indiana.edu/html/about.cfm [accessed 28/09/2019]

4. Skills development

4.1 Overall

Skills development year on year
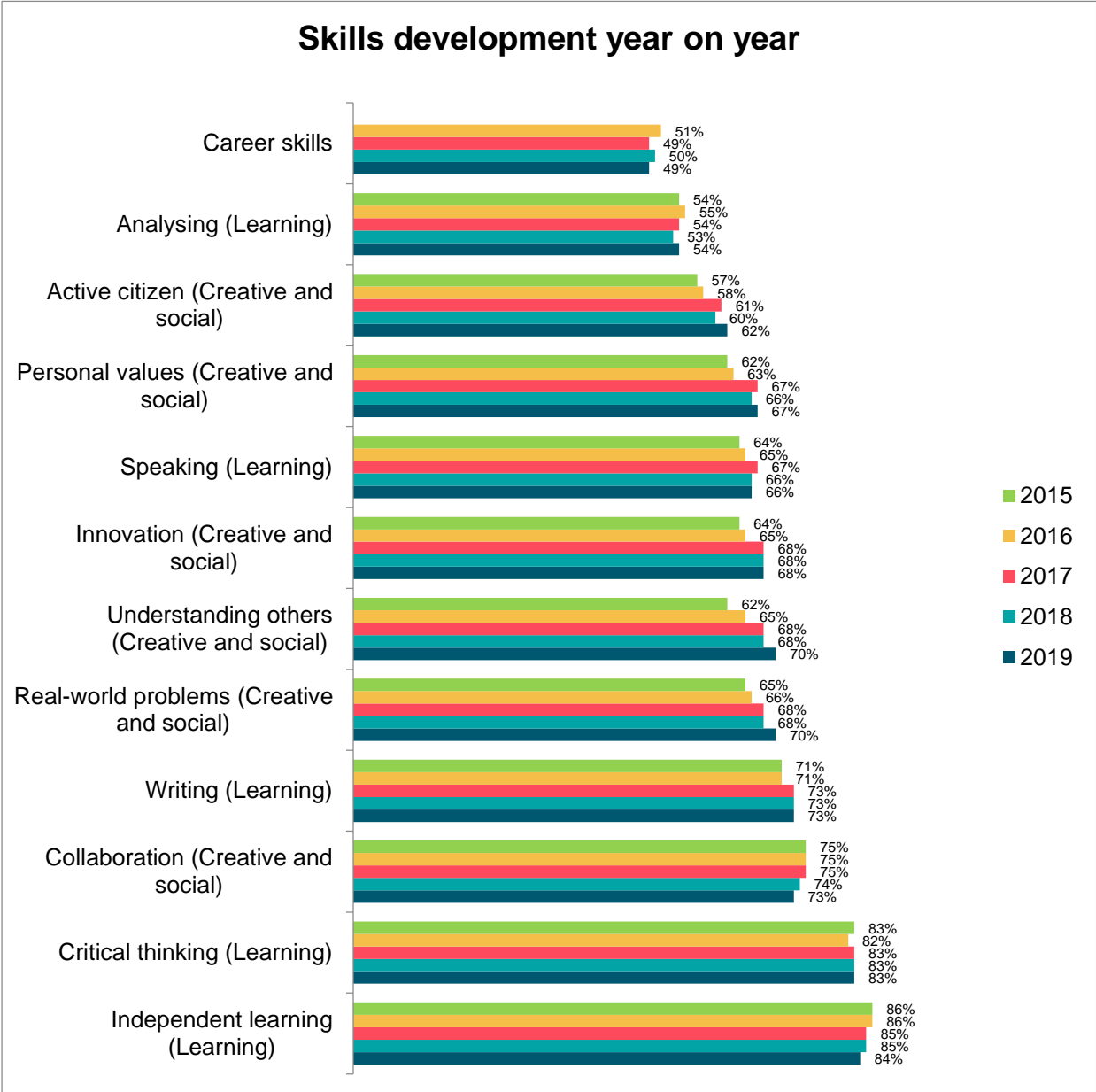
Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Items ranked in ascending order of skills development.
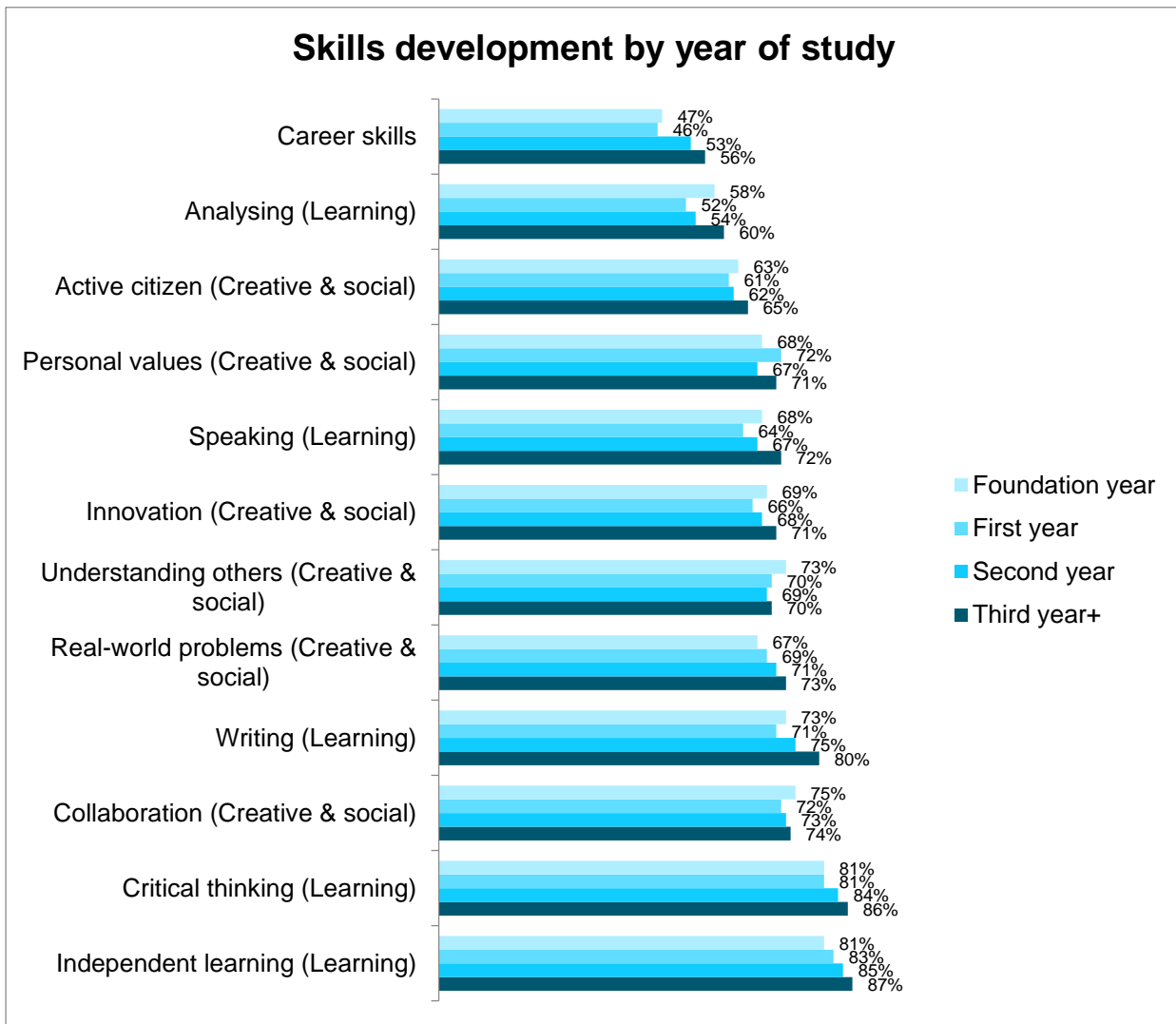
Five consecutive years of data give us a unique viewpoint on how the perspective of skills development has changed over time.

A handful of skills areas in particular stand out as having improved by five percentage points or more, specifically "being an informed and active citizen" (57%–62%), "developing personal values" (62%–67%), "understanding others" (62%–70%), and "exploring complex real-world Problems" (65%–70%). What is particularly striking is that these are all what we have termed "creative and social skills", which measure areas of rounded development away from more traditional academic "Learning" skills.

Arguably it is these types of skill which play a key role in preparation for a full and successful life and career after graduation so it is encouraging to see real evidence that their development has accelerated, which potentially implies a greater emphasis on these skills within institutions across the sector.

In comparison, many of the remaining skills items have shown little or no change across participating institutions since UKES has been operating. This is particularly the case for the skills items we have termed "Learning skills" as well as the key aspect of career skills (for example skills to help get a job), which has remained relatively low since it was first measured in its current form in 2016. It should be noted however that the majority of UKES participants tend to be first and second-year undergraduates, for whom the development of career skills is not always particularly high on the agenda. It may therefore be overly critical to highlight the low career-skills development as an area of concern for the sector, particularly in light of the data below which identifies the extent to which these skills develop over time.

There are in fact stark differences in students' recognition of skills development as they progress though their undergraduate studies, as evidenced by the chart below.

Skills development by year of study

Career skills: 47%, 46%, 53%, 56%
Analysing (Learning): 58%, 52%, 54%, 60%
Active citizen (Creative & social): 63%, 61%, 62%, 65%
Personal values (Creative & social): 68%, 72%, 67%, 71%
Speaking (Learning): 68%, 64%, 67%, 72%
Innovation (Creative & social): 69%, 66%, 68%, 71%
Understanding others (Creative & social): 73%, 70%, 69%, 70%
Real-world problems (Creative & social): 67%, 69%, 71%, 73%
Writing (Learning): 73%, 71%, 75%, 80%
Collaboration (Creative & social): 75%, 72%, 73%, 74%
Critical thinking (Learning): 81%, 81%, 84%, 86%
Independent learning (Learning): 81%, 83%, 85%, 87%

Legend: Foundation year, First year, Second year, Third year+

Base: Foundation year (1,556); First year (13,211); Second year (11,601); Third year+ (3,024).

Contrasting with a general trend of increased development between the first, second and third year of studies, we also see a fall in skills gain in many areas between the foundation and first year. This may potentially be explained by a dose of realism and a series of challenges experienced during the first year which were not encountered in the same way among the relatively small sample of foundation-year students.

The concept of the "second-year dip" (or the "sophomore slump")[7] is a generally recognised concept within higher education, but in UKES it appears to find its manifestation between the foundation and first year. By contrast, second-year students tend to recognise that their skills develop at a greater rate compared to their first year, something which then tends to

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[7] https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/forgotten-year-tackling-%E2%80%98sophomore-slump%E2%80%99 [accessed 28/09/2019]

accelerate even further in the third year. This accelerated development from first to third year is particularly evident for career skills, as well as many of the "learning" skills such as independent learning, critical thinking, speaking and writing.

Interestingly, some of the more "creative and social" skills such as developing personal values, understanding others and collaboration do not particularly accelerate across the different stages of undergraduate learning and are strong early on, implying that the first year (and foundation year) experience is relatively strong in these areas.

Across all these items, the development of career skills accelerates the most over time, although it might be argued that encouraging undergraduates to focus on this area at the earliest possible stage is to be recommended.

Although third-year students are typically less well represented in UKES (due principally to their participation in the National Student Survey and the challenges of accommodating both surveys among this audience), there are clear advantages for institutions that are able to include this cohort within their sample, as they can compare cohorts as they progress.

4.2   How does engagement help develop skills?

Correlation analysis enables us to identify the aspects of student engagement measured by UKES which have the strongest connection with skills development.

This has been conducted for a selection of three skills items, selected to represent the range of skills covered, from employability (career skills) to creative and social skills (solving real-world problems) to learning skills (writing).

Skills item	Top 5 correlations	Engagement section	Correlation value 2019[8]	Engage-ment
Career skills	1. Discussed career plans with staff	Interacting with staff	0.417	24%
	2. Contributed to a joint community of staff/students	Staff–student partnerships	0.365	42%
	3. Worked with staff to evaluate teaching and assessment practices	Staff–student partnerships	0.361	41%
	4. Worked with staff to make improvements to your course	Staff–student partnerships	0.354	43%
	5. Learning about the outcomes of current research in your subject	Research and inquiry	0.343	66%
Exploring complex real-world problems	1. Connected your learning to real-life problems or issues	Reflecting and connecting	0.505	64%
	2. Changed your view on an issue as a result of what you learned	Reflecting and connecting	0.422	65%
	3. Examined the strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic	Reflecting and connecting	0.412	64%
	4. Learning about the outcomes of current research in your subject	Research and inquiry	0.407	66%
	5. Formulating and exploring your own questions, problems or scenarios	Research and inquiry	0.397	61%
Writing clearly and effectively	1. Learning about the outcomes of current research in your subject	Research and inquiry	0.385	66%
	2. Learning about the methods of research and analysis in your subject	Research and inquiry	0.383	74%
	3. Evaluating or judging a point of view	Critical thinking	0.380	75%
	4. Course challenged to do best work	Course challenge	0.379	87%
	5. Formulating and exploring your own questions, problems or scenarios	Research and inquiry	0.367	61%

[8] Statistical definitions using Pearson's bivariate correlation guidelines where 0.501+ is strong, 0.30 to 0.50 is moderate and 0.10 to 0.30 is weak. All correlations are significant at 99%.

For each skill, the above table lists the five engagement items which correlate most strongly, together with the overall section that the item comes from, the size of the correlation, and crucially the engagement score for each item, which helps identify the key areas (in red) where engagement is low but any improvement could have a major impact on skills.

Although for reasons of space we have looked at just three skills items from the 12 in the survey, what stands out from this analysis is the importance of some of the "optional items" within UKES, specifically the items that measure staff–student partnerships, and research and inquiry. Working in partnership with staff is potentially key to developing employability skills, as well as a range of other skills such as speaking (as identified in 2018's analysis). Even more wide ranging in its influence is research and inquiry, which is linked to addressing complex problems and to writing (as measured in 2019), as well as innovation, informed citizen and speaking (as measured in 2018's analysis). Both of these areas are optional sections in UKES and hence institutions that do not choose to include them are potentially missing out on an opportunity to track a key area of their students' development.

The other element highlighted in this analysis is the extent to which students are engaging in these potentially key aspects. As discussed in the chapter on engagement, the level of interaction and/or partnership with staff is low (albeit rising), and hence this may potentially link to the relatively low levels of career skills development – which is the lowest scoring of the 12 skills items. Hence, as per the correlations identified, greater interaction with staff may help increase the development of career skills.
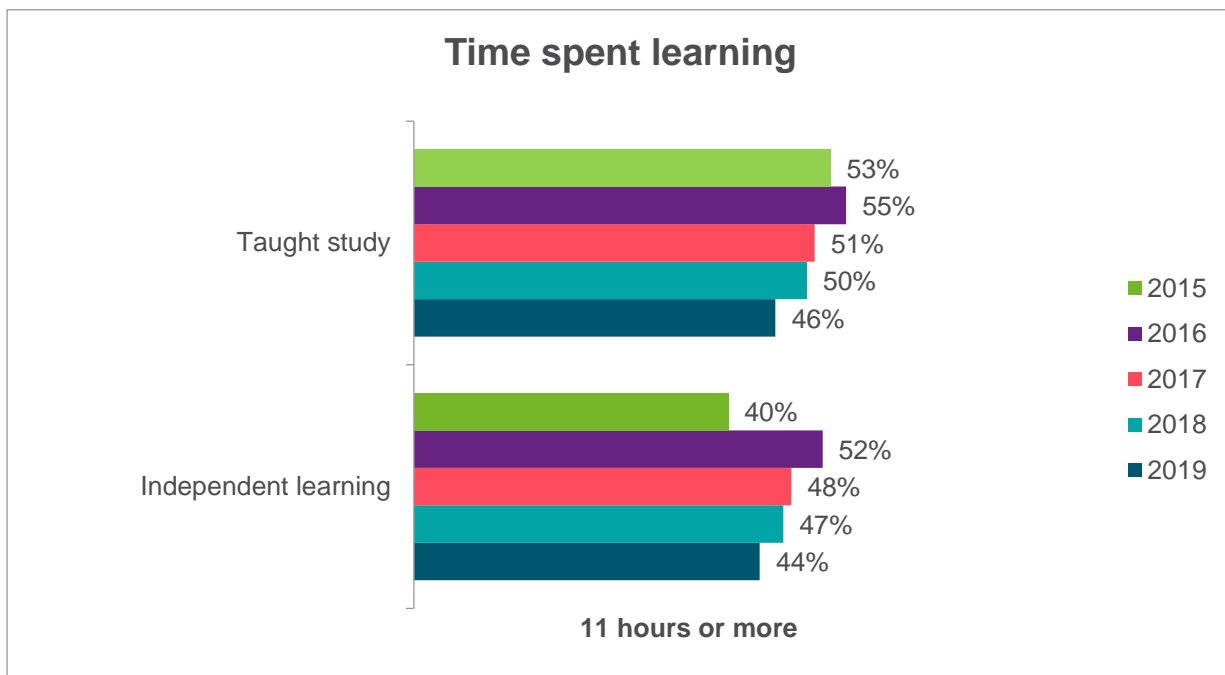
Likewise, increasing the level of time spent on reflection and inquiry may potentially help increase understanding of real-world problems and development of writing skills – although in the case of writing skills the level of engagement on the items of greatest correlation is relatively high.

5. Time spent learning

5.1 Overall

Alongside levels of engagement and skills development, the third major area covered by UKES collects evidence of how much time students are spending in study and non-study activities.

Beginning with learning, and splitting this into taught and independent learning, the data highlights a clear and consistent decline since 2016 in the proportion of students spending 11 hours or more per week in taught classes and/or independent learning, with taught study declining by 4% this year, to 46%, and independent learning falling by 3%, to 44%.

Time spent learning

Taught study:
- 2015: 53%
- 2016: 55%
- 2017: 51%
- 2018: 50%
- 2019: 46%

Independent learning:
- 2015: 40%
- 2016: 52%
- 2017: 48%
- 2018: 47%
- 2019: 44%

11 hours or more

Base: Taught study (21,762 / 16,263 / 32,662 / 25,641 / 26,856); independent learning (21,739 / 16,228 / 32,419 / 25,633 / 26,823).

The Advance HE and HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey (referenced earlier) similarly reports in detail on study time and trends across the sector. This comparative study also identifies a decline in independent study, continuing over time. However, unlike UKES it reports a small but regular increase in taught study.[9]

Hence the data across the sector does not reach a consensus as to whether there appears to be a clear decline in taught study, although there is consistency in highlighting an apparent decline in independent study.
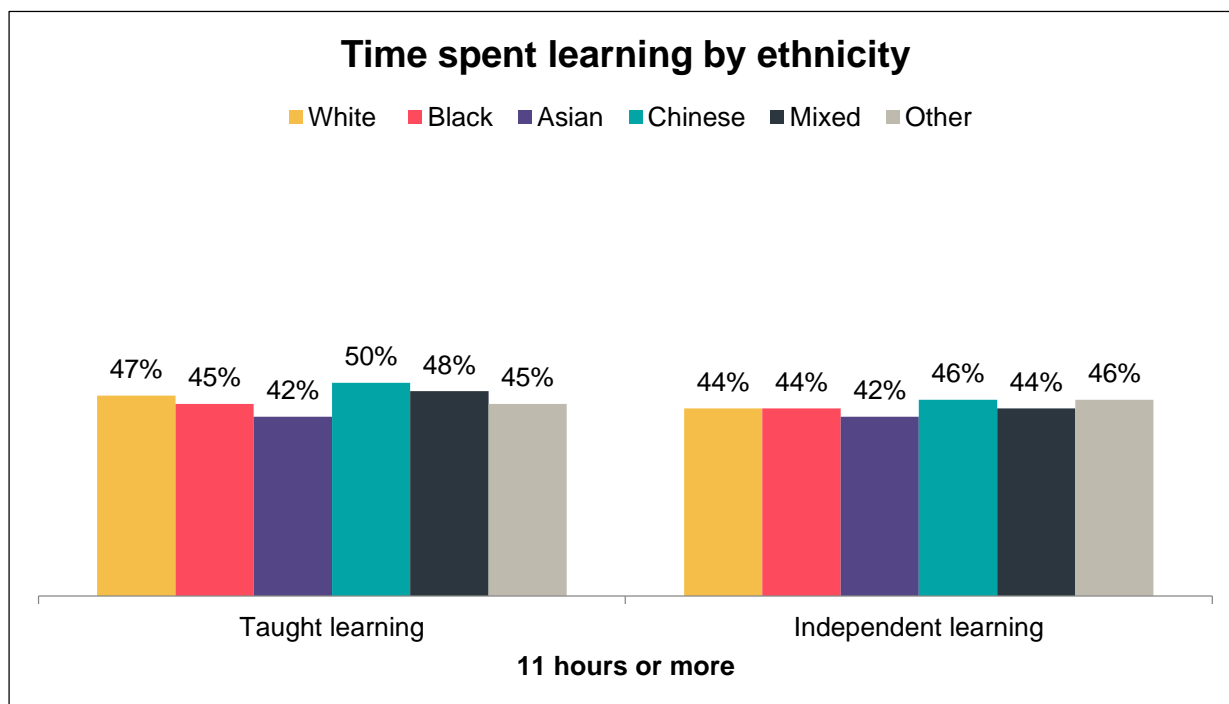
Irrespective of whether these results prove a wider sector decline, it is still relatively concerning that fewer than half of students within UKES-participating institutions report that they spend more than 10 hours a week in taught classes – a decline of 7% since 2015. Likewise, despite wide-ranging research citing the benefits of independent learning,[10] and its inclusion within UKES as both a skill and area of engagement, it is perhaps disappointing to see the consistent decline in time being spent in this area.

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[9] Neves, J. and Hillman, N. (2019). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI. https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/student-academic-experience-survey-2019, p. 32.

[10] https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/about/news/new-research-shows-benefits-independent-learning [accessed 28/09/2019]

5.2 Differences by ethnicity

In the light of the decline in time spent learning overall, against the relatively high levels of engagement among Black students, as seen earlier, we have conducted analysis to see how study time varies by ethnicity. Again this analysis has been conducted based on students from the UK only, to remove the impact of overseas students on ethnic comparisons.

Time spent learning by ethnicity

■White ■Black ■Asian ■Chinese ■Mixed ■Other

	Taught learning	Independent learning
White	47%	44%
Black	45%	44%
Asian	42%	42%
Chinese	50%	46%
Mixed	48%	44%
Other	45%	46%

11 hours or more

Base: UK domicile. White (17,304); Black (1,931); Asian (2,307); Chinese (141); Mixed (898); Other (423).

There are no real consistent distinctions emerging between the broad categories of White and BME but looking at the individual ethnic groups there are some contrasts. Interestingly, although Black students are highly likely to engage in learning they do not spend any more time doing so. By contrast the time spent in learning for White students is higher than some other groups, but we have seen their engagement levels are often lower, which calls into question whether they are dedicating their time to the most effective activities. The one ethnic group that stands out for spending the most time learning is UK-domiciled students of Chinese ethnicity, although it should be pointed out that the base size for this data point is relatively low – as most students of Chinese ethnicity are not from the UK.

5.3 Study hours and skills development

We would reasonably expect time spent in study to have a positive impact on skills, but as the graph below shows, taught and independent study appear to impact to differing extents upon the 12 skills measured in UKES.

As a broad summary, students who report 11 hours or more of study (taught or independent) per week are more likely to report skills development than those with fewer than 11 hours' study. This is logical but it is still encouraging to see the data that backs this up, particularly in the light of the decline we have seen in time spent studying. This provides institutions, and the sector, with evidence to help address this decline.
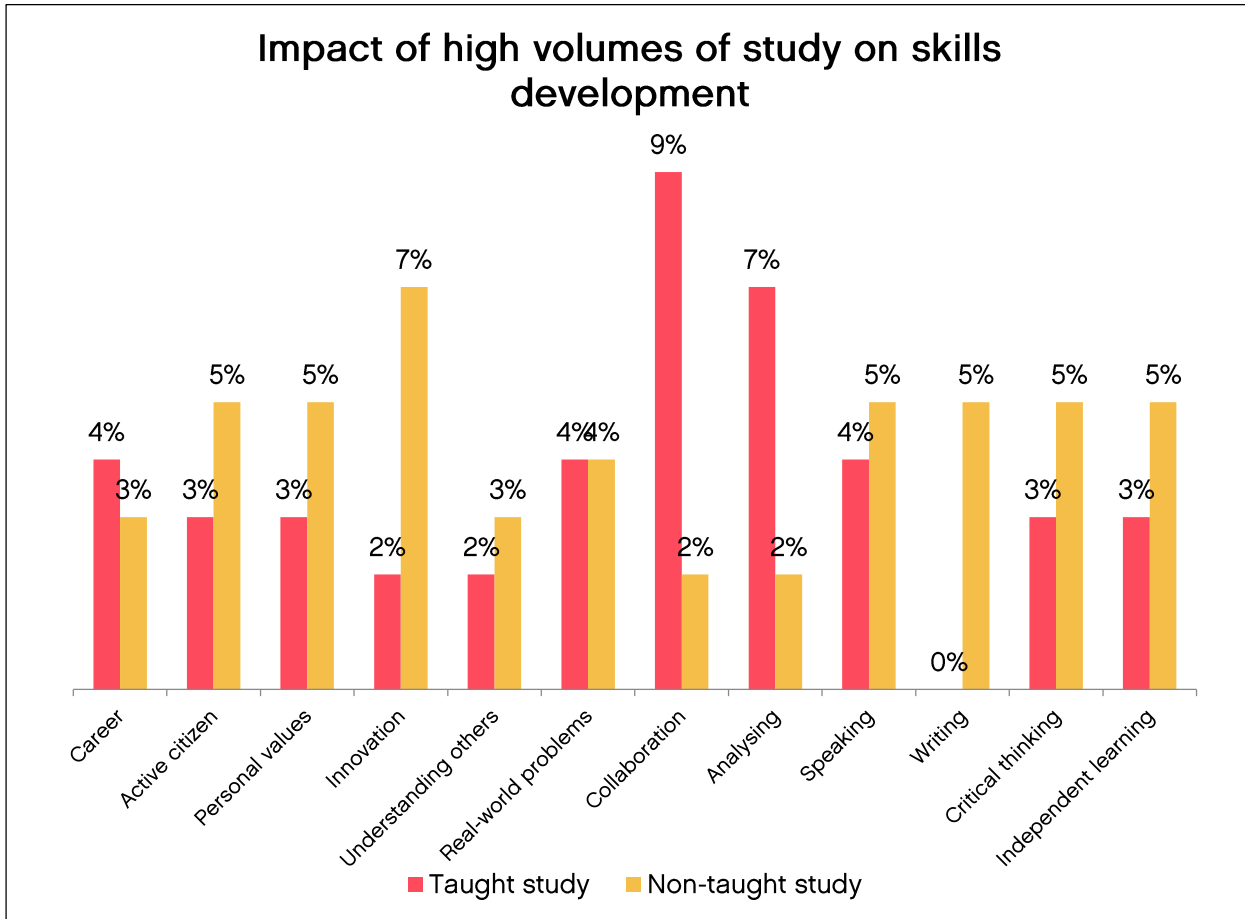

Chart shows the percentage difference in reported skills development (% saying very much/quite a lot) between students who undertook 11 or more hours of study (taught or non-taught) compared to students with 11 hours or less.

In terms of the different levels of impact, these findings underline the value of independent learning, which is the principal driver of development in most of the skills areas, with the exceptions of Collaboration and Analysing, where taught study has a clear advantage. This again provided evidence for institutions to take action against the decline in independent learning as measured consistently by both UKES and the Student Academic Experience Survey.

Significantly, neither taught nor independent study appears to have a significant impact on students developing career skills, which as we will see in the next chapter are highly likely to be influenced by certain extra-curricular activities.

6. Extra-curricular activity

6.1 Activities and responsibilities

As well as measuring study time, UKES also measures how students spend their time across a range of extra-curricular activities and responsibilities.
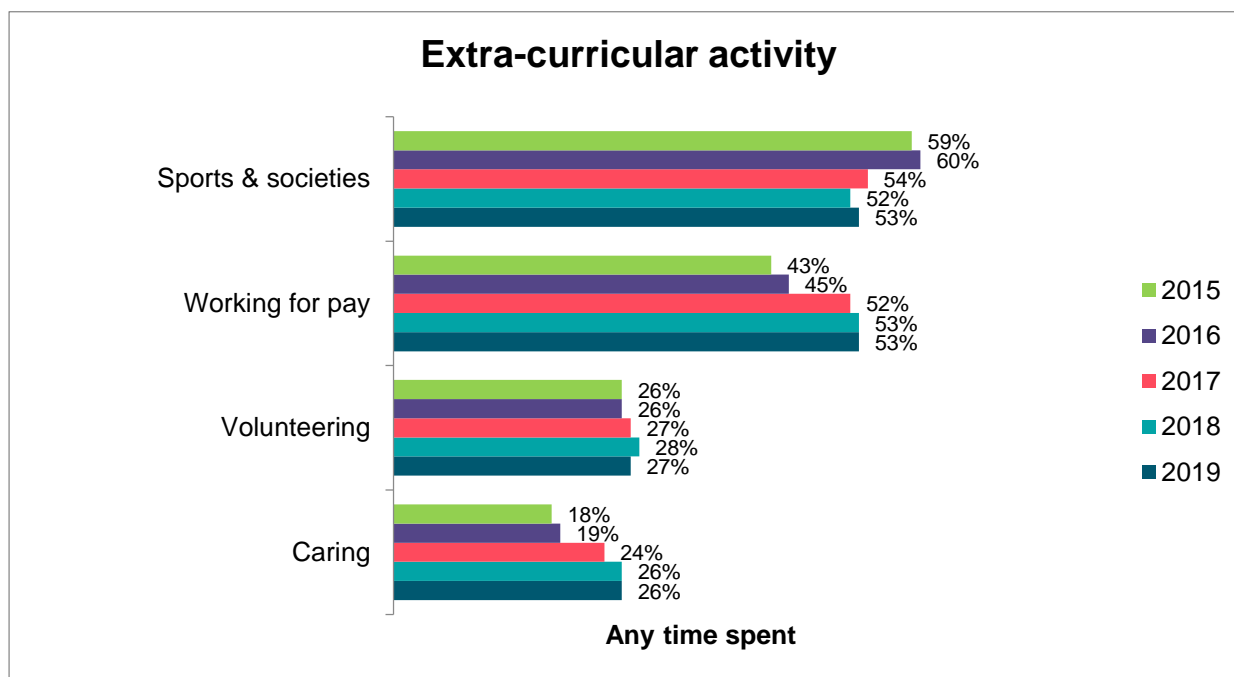
Base: Sports and societies (21,700 / 16,242 / 32,419 / 25,608 / 26,825); Working for pay (21,692 / 16,235 / 32,572 / 25,568 / 26,782); Volunteering (21,585 / 16,151 / 32,391/ 25,468 / 26,655); Caring (21,662 /1 6,205 / 32,542 / 25,337 / 26,760).
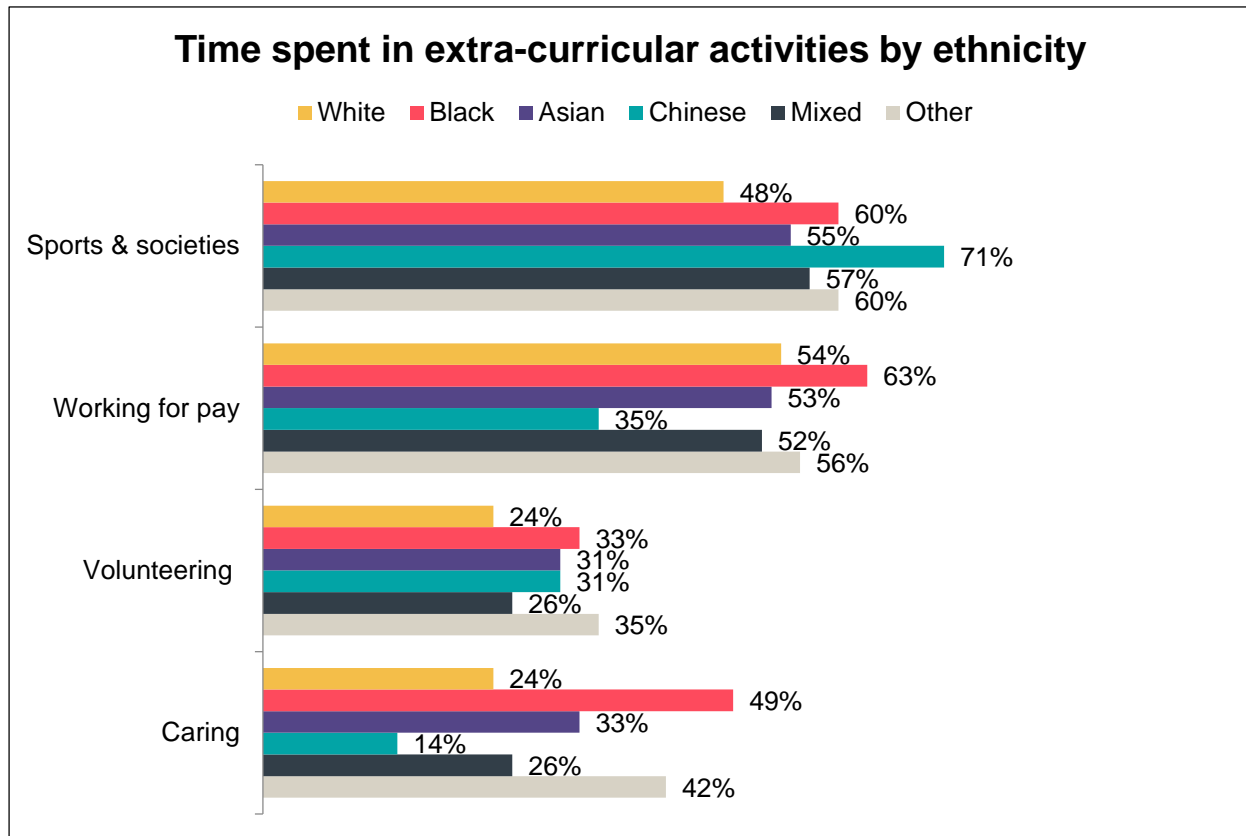
Although year-on-year changes are small, the overall picture before 2019 depicts a decline in time spent in sports and societies and an increase in time spent working for pay and caring – activities more related to responsibilities. We speculated in previous reports that this trend was potentially a concerning one, particularly in the case of time spent working for pay which data (in previous years and later in this chapter) has identified as not being a particularly strong contributor to students developing a wide range of skills.

It is potentially significant therefore that in 2019 these trends appear to have been halted – which is encouraging. There has actually been a 1% (and statistically significant) increase in the proportion of students engaging in sports and societies while the proportions working for pay and caring have not changed. Volunteering has fallen by 1% but overall has remained remarkably consistent over the past five years.

The decline in time spent studying remains a concern but at least there is evidence here that students are being encouraged to spend more time taking advantage of the traditional undergraduate opportunities that sports and societies provide.

6.2   Extra-curricular activity and ethnicity

Although comparison of time spent in taught and independent learning does show up some differences by ethnicity, these are relatively small in comparison to what we see in this analysis of extra-curricular activity.

Time spent in extra-curricular activities by ethnicity

Legend: White ■ Black ■ Asian ■ Chinese ■ Mixed ■ Other

Sports & societies
- White: 48%
- Black: 60%
- Asian: 55%
- Chinese: 71%
- Mixed: 57%
- Other: 60%

Working for pay
- White: 54%
- Black: 63%
- Asian: 53%
- Chinese: 35%
- Mixed: 52%
- Other: 56%

Volunteering
- White: 24%
- Black: 33%
- Asian: 31%
- Chinese: 31%
- Mixed: 26%
- Other: 35%

Caring
- White: 24%
- Black: 49%
- Asian: 33%
- Chinese: 14%
- Mixed: 26%
- Other: 42%

Base: UK domicile. White (17,304); Black (1,931); Asian (2,307); Chinese (141); Mixed (898); Other (423).

Ethnicity in this case really appears to be a major driver of difference. White students are the least likely to take part in sports and societies and indeed display low participation across all these activities. This is potentially a concern – particularly in terms of sports/societies and volunteering which may be more likely to be seen as an active choice as opposed to a necessity – and may reflect a lack of recognition of the benefits of wider participation. We have seen that White students spend a lot of time in taught learning, which may be impacting on the time available for activities, although data does highlight that the most engaged students are often able to find time for a range of learning and activity types.

By contrast, Chinese students appear to value sports and societies hugely but are unlikely to have caring responsibilities and are by far the least likely to spend time working for pay. These results appear to be reflective of prioritisation by UK-domiciled Chinese students to devote their time to societies, as well as (as we saw earlier) to their learning.

Spending time working for pay is often an economic necessity – albeit one that may not be the best choice for students' development. These results here are striking, however, in that Black students are by far the most likely to spend time working for pay, but they are also highly likely to spend time in the other activities listed. Hence, there is evidence of how students can and do balance differing commitments and that taking part in extra-curricular activities does not necessarily require a choice between one activity or the others. When we consider this alongside earlier results which identified high levels of engagement among Black students, we can see a real body of evidence of how many Black students devote significant time and energy to their time at university.

6.3   Activities and skills development

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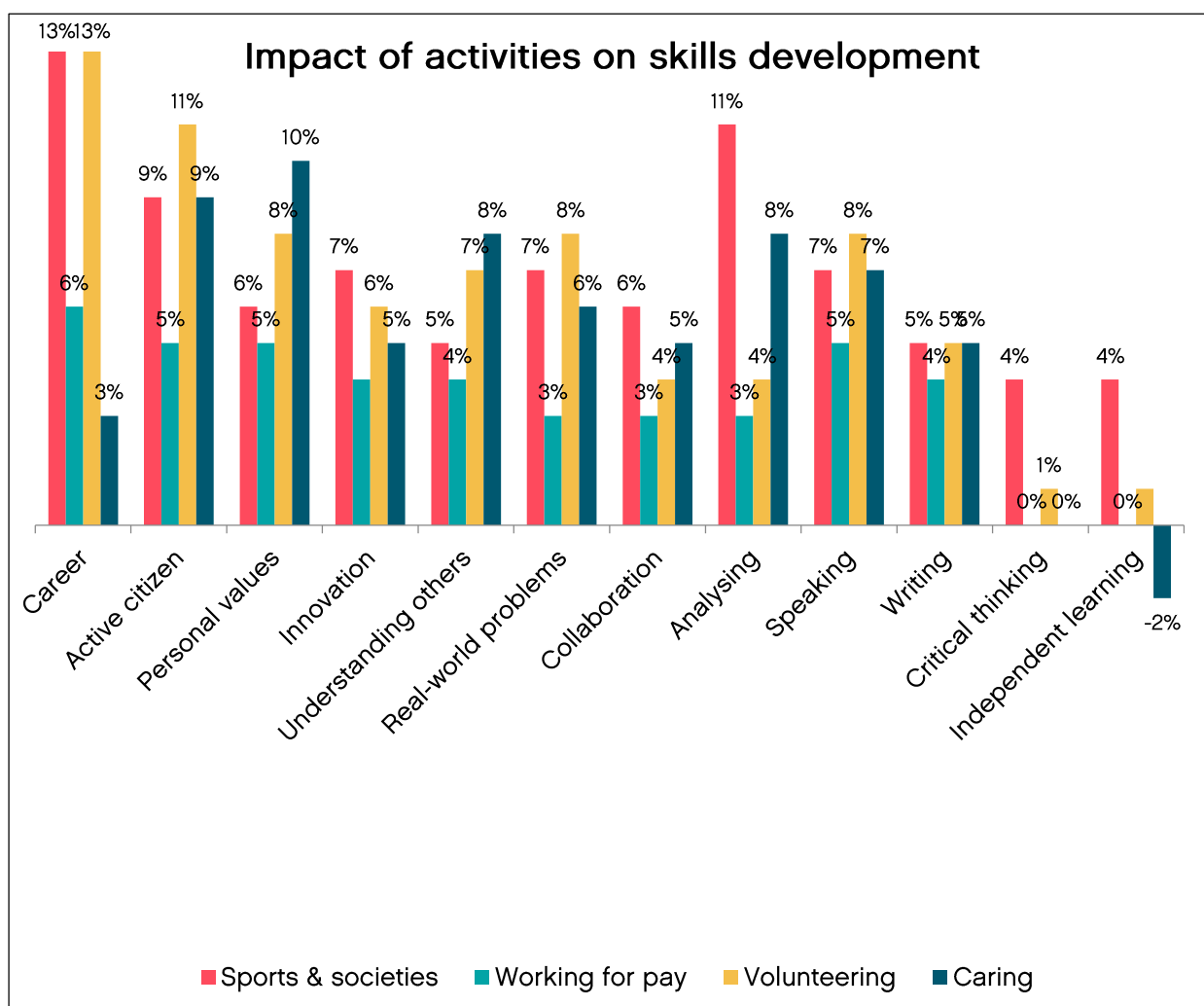

Chart shows the percentage difference in the development of each skill (% saying very much/quite a bit) between students who participated in each activity (any time spent) compared to students who did not participate at all.

This analysis identifies a number of prominent findings. Overall it is the softer skills towards the left-hand side of the graph (i.e. those that we have referred to as "creative and social skills") where we see more of a link to time spent on non-study activities, compared to the harder skills on the right-hand side (those we have referred to as "learning skills"). Career skills also stand out and are in fact the skills item for which we see the strongest link to time spent in these activities. As we saw earlier, study time does not hugely impact on career skills – but by contrast these activities appear to be a strong influence.

We know that the creative and social skills, as well as career skills, are more about wider development of personal characteristics and therefore it is logical that participation in this range of extra-curricular activities is more strongly linked to the development of these skills than to some of the narrower (but still vital) academic skills.

Arguably the key area of insight developed from this analysis is a comparison of which types of activity have the strongest link with the development of the different skills. Overall we can see that working for pay is the single activity that has the least impact, and in the case of critical thinking and independent learning, there is no tangible impact at all. Students who are required by economic necessity to work for pay are often employed in jobs which bear no relation to the careers that they aspire towards through their studies, and in many cases these jobs are relatively low-skilled. Although gaining work experience while at university can be vital in helping students develop their CV, the evidence here is that there are a range of other activities which are more effective at developing a rounded set of skills.

Among the set of four activities measured, sports/societies link very strongly to career skills, as well as innovation, critical thinking and independent learning, while volunteering impacts consistently across most skills, including career skills, becoming an active citizen and solving real-world problems. Sports/societies have traditionally been a key part of the UK undergraduate experience and these results provide evidence as to why institutions should take action to maintain the availability of these activities. Likewise, volunteering activity appears to be more developmental in terms of skills than working for pay, and anything that can be done to support students in taking up volunteering opportunities would be likely to pay dividends in terms of how students develop.

The final activity covered here – caring for others (which is likely to be more of a responsibility than a choice) – can also deliver real advantages by helping students develop a rounded skill set. Interestingly, there are some areas where caring appears to have little or no impact – for example independent learning and career skills – but there are others where it has a major impact, such as developing personal values, understanding others and becoming an active citizen, all activities which are associated with a broad and rounded level of development.

A key finding from this analysis is that there are varied ways that students can develop skills, both in terms of learning and extra-curricular activities. Therefore, if institutions can help students recognise the benefits of all these activities, including those such as sports and societies which may be on the decline among particular cohorts, students will have the best opportunity of developing a rounded set of skills to prepare them for life after graduation. Likewise investing in providing support and opportunities for students who may feel burdened by study or work (that is, paid work) commitments is likely to deliver positive returns.

7. Retention

A new question was added to UKES for 2019 which asked students the extent to which they have considered leaving their course. As well as being interested in the direct answers to this question, we are also keen on the potential to combine this question with some of the engagement elements to provide evidence as to how engagement with different aspects of learning, and spending time in different activities may impact positively on retention.
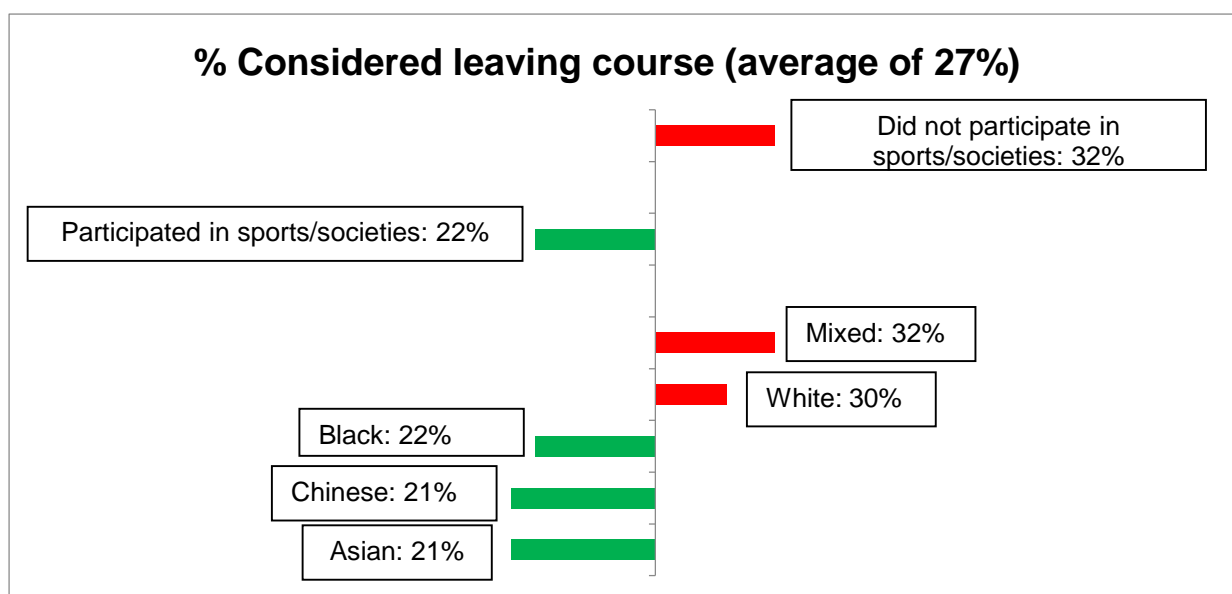
Just over one in four students had considered leaving their course, but there are two areas discussed in the rest of this report that appear to have a clear link with retention – ethnicity and participation in sports/societies.

Strikingly, students who have taken part in sports and societies are significantly less likely than average to have considered leaving their course. We have seen how sports and societies can link strongly to skills development, and these results here provide evidence of wider benefits – potentially in terms of social interaction and teamwork.

In terms of differences by ethnicity, the low potential retention among mixed students is potentially a concern and does not appear to link clearly to other major findings in this dataset which may explain it. By contrast the high retention among UK domiciled Black and Chinese students may be at least partly linked to high levels of participation in sports and societies and high levels of engagement in learning (in the case of Black students). Clearly, retention is a complex issue and these findings do not imply that this can be solved by something as straightforward as participation in extra-curricular activities or engagement in learning but there is some evidence that these activities may help to make a difference.

Further evidence is provided by the data below. Across all 29 items that measure engagement, there are three aspects in particular where a high level of engagement is linked to a relatively low propensity to consider leaving. Significantly, all 3 of these aspects are related to interacting/partnering with staff, whereas we see below if a student engages "very much" or "very often" in these aspects, they are much less likely than average to consider leaving their course.

Base: Total sample (29,649); Worked with teaching staff (408); Talked about career plans (480); Evaluate teaching practices (642).

We have seen earlier in this report how working with staff can bring major benefits in terms of development of career skills, and this provides further evidence of how providing opportunities and encouragement for students to work with staff is likely to pay dividends.

Reasons considered leaving
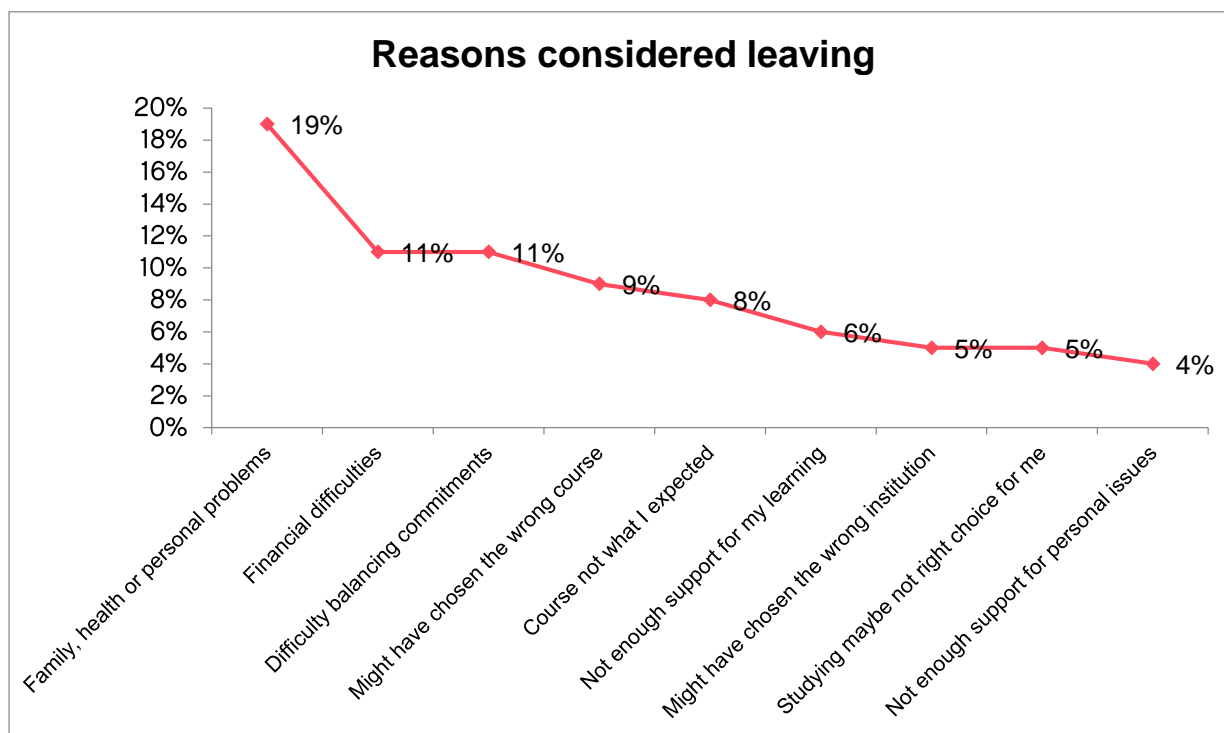
Base: All who had considered leaving (7,877).

Through a new follow-up question, the data identifies the main reasons for considering leaving. Personal or health reasons stood out, followed by financial concerns, challenges in balancing commitments and more general doubts about the choice of course/institution. On the face of it, the concerns around balancing commitments may appear to go against the general themes emerging in this report which emphasise the value of engaging in learning and taking part in activities. What this does emphasise however is the importance of institutions working with students to help manage their commitments – while also helping them understand where they are best spending their time.

8. Considerations for the sector

1. UKES provides clear and positive evidence of how UK-domiciled Black students are dedicated to their learning and development – often setting a positive example in comparison with their fellow students. Investigating and understanding how this level of dedication could be harnessed effectively may potentially provide a missing link as the sector continues to grapple with addressing the BME attainment gap.

2. The benefits of students engaging and collaborating with staff are clear – identified in this report as helping to develop career skills and being associated with improved retention. Despite this, student engagement in this area is low. Dedicated initiatives within institutions and across the sector to promote and provide opportunities to collaborate and partner with staff would be likely to deliver positive results for students' development.

3. Career skills begin to develop in earnest during the later stages of undergraduate study. However, the relatively low scores reported, together with the declines over time, highlight an opportunity for institutions to focus more resources on encouraging students to consider how their learning and activities at all stages of study will help them in their employability.

4. UKES provides clear evidence as to the benefits of extra-curricular activities, in particular how sports and societies, volunteering and caring can be more beneficial than working for pay. By continuing to provide and support these opportunities, and looking into ways to help students manage the demands of paid work, institutions can help provide the optimum environment for development.

9. Appendix 1

9.1 Demographics

Category	Characteristic	UKES 2019 responses	UKES 2019 %
Gender	Male	9,666	33%
	Female	20,040	67%
Age	21 and under	19,331	66%
	22 and over	10,008	34%
Fee status	UK	26,012	88%
	Other EU	1,589	5%
	Non-EU	2,141	7%
Ethnicity (UK domicile)	BME	8,039	28%
	Non-BME	20,951	72%
Mode	Face to face	26,168	88%
	Distance learners	3,444	12%
Year	Foundation	1,556	5%
	1	13,211	45%
	2	11,601	40%
	3+	3,024	10%

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 an answer category was provided.

9.2 Institutions

Category	Type	UKES 2019 responses	UKES 2019 %
Benchmark group	Pre-92	8,924	30%
	Post-92	19,633	66%
	Universities Alliance	8,222	28%
	Guild HE	1,896	6%
	Cathedrals Group	7,162	24%
	Million Plus	7,657	26%
	London	3,976	13%
	Small and specialist	1,227	4%

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