

# 2018 UK Engagement Survey

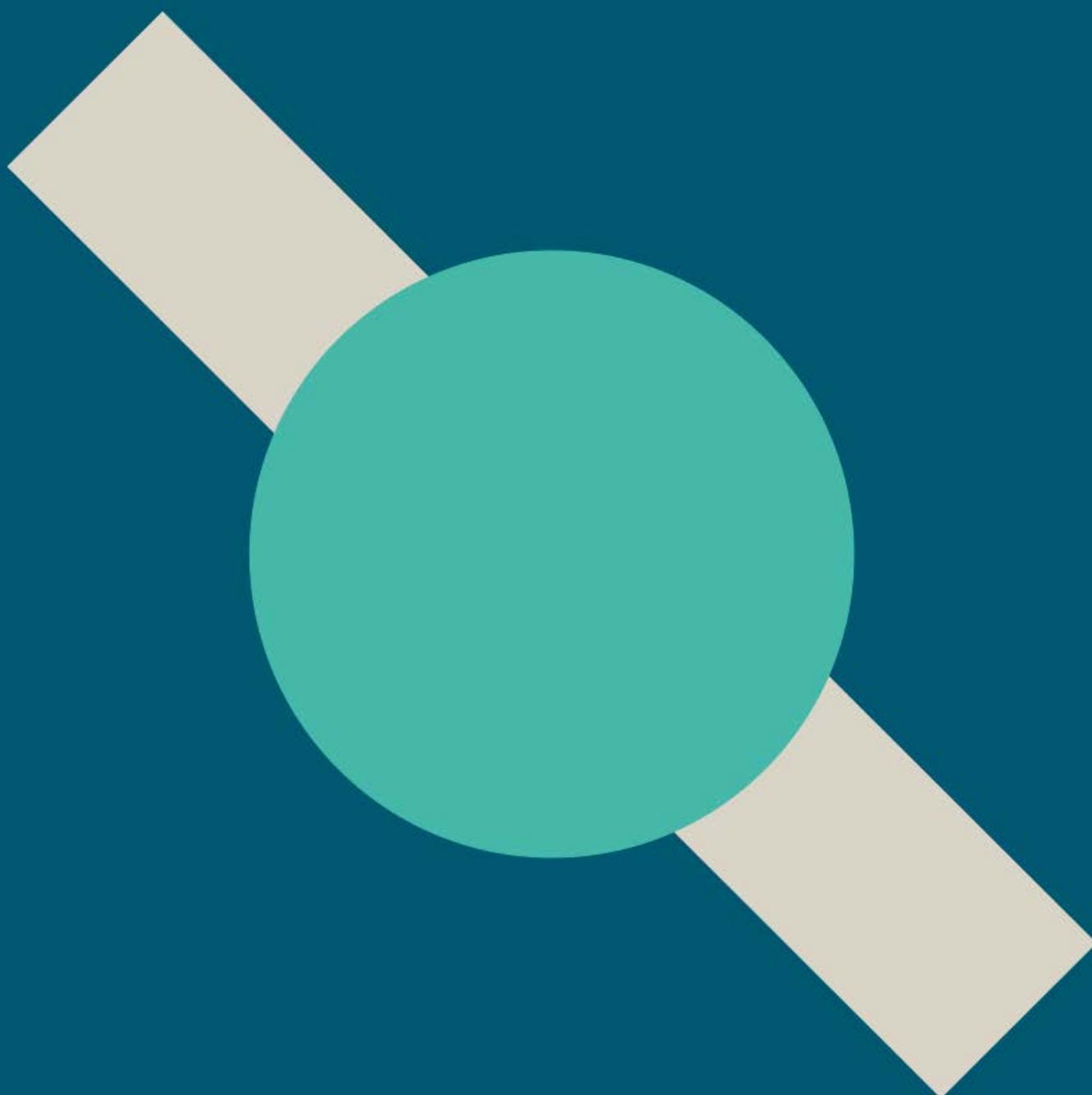
Jonathan Neves

 AdvanceHE

UK

ENGAGEMENT

SURVEY



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# 1. Executive Summary

The UK Engagement Survey (UKES) has now been running for 4 consecutive years, providing the scope for comparison over time based on a large undergraduate cohort.

It is striking that overall engagement levels continue to increase. This is the case across several key areas measured, but it is notable that the areas that have increased the most – partnering and interacting with staff – are those that have either had lowest levels in the past and/or are linked most closely with skills development. Hence here is real, robust evidence that institutions, many of which participate in UKES regularly, are focusing resources on increasing student engagement in the areas of highest return.

In terms of skills, undergraduates in the sample report lower levels of development of “softer” skills such as becoming an active citizen, developing real-world values and understanding others, compared to “academic” skills such as critical thinking and independent learning. The level of career skills development is also relatively low. However, these findings are largely explained by the fact that UKES contains a majority of first- and second-year undergraduates – who tend to develop softer skills (and career skills) later on in their academic experience.

The data on time spent studying highlights a clear and consistent decline in hours spent in both taught study and independent study. This is matched by a continued drop in participation in sports and societies. By contrast, time spent working for pay continues to increase, as does volunteering and caring, and there is evidence from the data that time spent on these activities can impact directly on the time available for study.

In the 2018 report we have analysed commuter students in detail for the first time, which has produced some interesting findings. In particular, the data highlights how commuter students, despite the time spent travelling, are more likely than other students to spend longer hours in both taught and independent study, and to take part in extra-curricular activities. Linked to this, levels of engagement and skills development also tend to be higher among commuter students, underlining the high levels of commitment that many of these students often display.

Another cohort with high levels of participation, and engagement, are students from low-participation neighbourhoods. As with commuter students, there is evidence that many students in this cohort display high levels of motivation and organisation in order to make the most out of their time at university.

## 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)<sup>1</sup> 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 7 broad engagement sections (29 question items in total), 12 items covering skills development, and sections measuring time spent on academic work (2 question items) and extra-curricular activity (5 question items). 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.

### 2.2 Content

Status	Theme	Question area	Items	2018 sector responses (minimum) <sup>2</sup>
Core	Engagement	Critical thinking	4	34,538
Core	Engagement	Learning with others	4	34,610
Core	Engagement	Interacting with staff	6	34,564
Core	Engagement	Reflecting and connecting	6	34,537
Core	Engagement	Course challenge/ independent learning	2	34,615
Optional	Engagement	Research and inquiry	4	21,946
Optional	Engagement	Staff–student partnerships	3	24,529
Optional	Skills development	Academic, career, personal development	12	28,185
Optional	Time spent	Academic work	2	25,633
Optional	Time spent	Extra-curricular activity	5	25,337

As with the rest of the Advance HE survey portfolio, 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 the institutions need to improve.

<sup>1</sup> Copyright, 2001–2017 The Trustees of Indiana University.

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

## 2.3 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
Institutions	24	29	42	38
Participants	24,387	23,198	35,927	34,635

Slightly fewer institutions took part in 2018 compared with 2017, but the average number of responses per institution increased, providing a large and robust sample of more than 34,000 undergraduates.

2018 participants	
Anglia Ruskin University*	University of Bolton
Birmingham City University**	University of Bradford**
Buckinghamshire New University*	University of Central Lancashire*
Canterbury Christ Church University**	University of Chester
Edge Hill University	University of Chichester**
Goldsmiths, University of London**	University of East Anglia*
Hartpury College	University of Essex*
Liverpool John Moores University**	University of Greenwich**
Norwich University of the Arts*	University of Huddersfield
Oxford Brookes	University of Leicester**
Queen Mary, University of London	University of Portsmouth*
Royal Northern College of Music	University of Reading**
Sheffield Hallam University**	University of Roehampton*
SOAS, University of London*	University of St Mark & St John**
St Mary's University, Twickenham**	University of Sunderland*
Teesside University*	University of Wales Trinity Saint David*
The Royal Central School of Speech and Drama	University of Winchester**
University of Bath**	University of Wolverhampton*
University of Bedfordshire*	York St John University**
*Also participated in 2017	
**Participated in both 2016 and 2017	

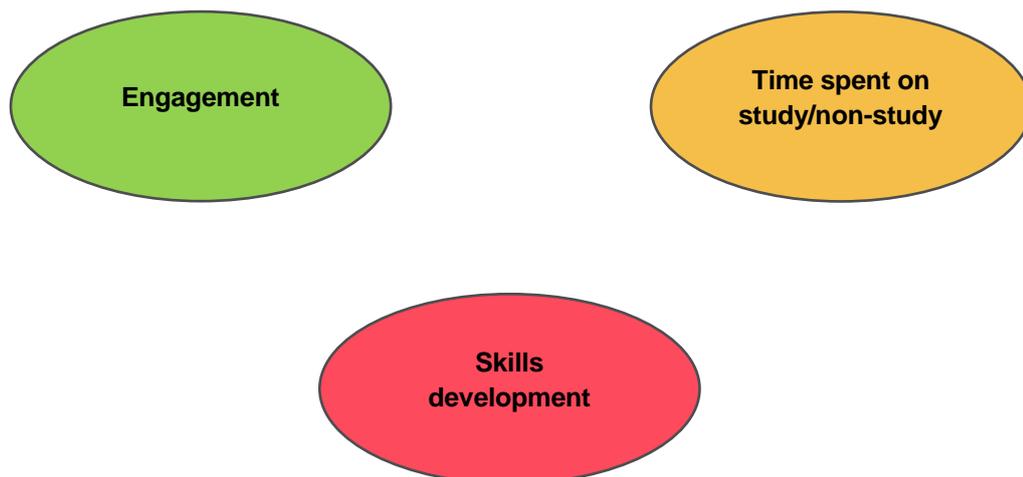
As well as a number of new entrants, and those coming back into UKES after a break, we have a strong number of regular participants in the survey, spread across different parts of the UK and different types of institution, providing us with a good degree of consistency when comparing the findings at sector level.

Combinations of these institutions have been developed to provide participants with 6 benchmark groups for comparison.

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

## 2.4 How results are reported

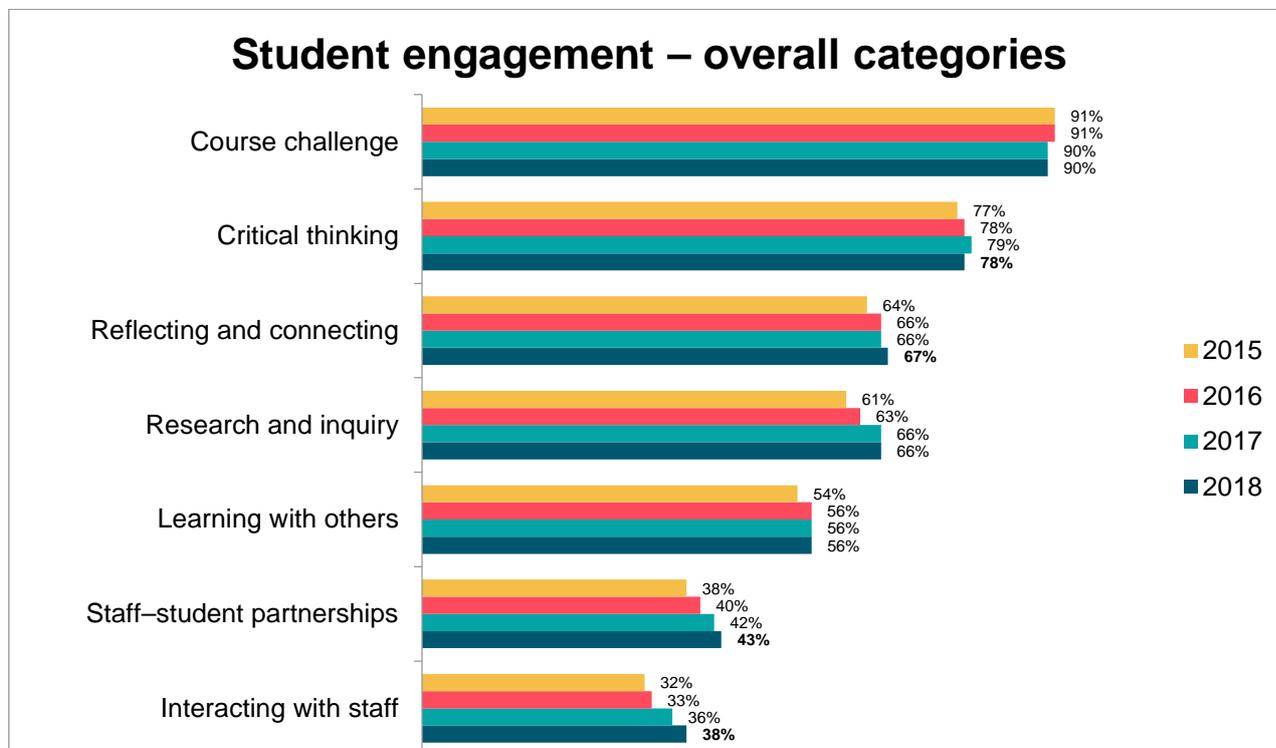
As outlined above, there are 3 main sections in UKES – engagement, skills development, and time spent on activities. For each section, this report focuses on the comparison of the different items within each section among the student population as a whole, and also identifies key demographic differences. The report also features some analysis looking at links between the sections.



## 3. Engagement

### 3.1 Overall

As outlined above, there are 7 categories of engagement measured by UKES, and now we have four full years of data we can compare them relative to each other as well as over time.



*Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.*

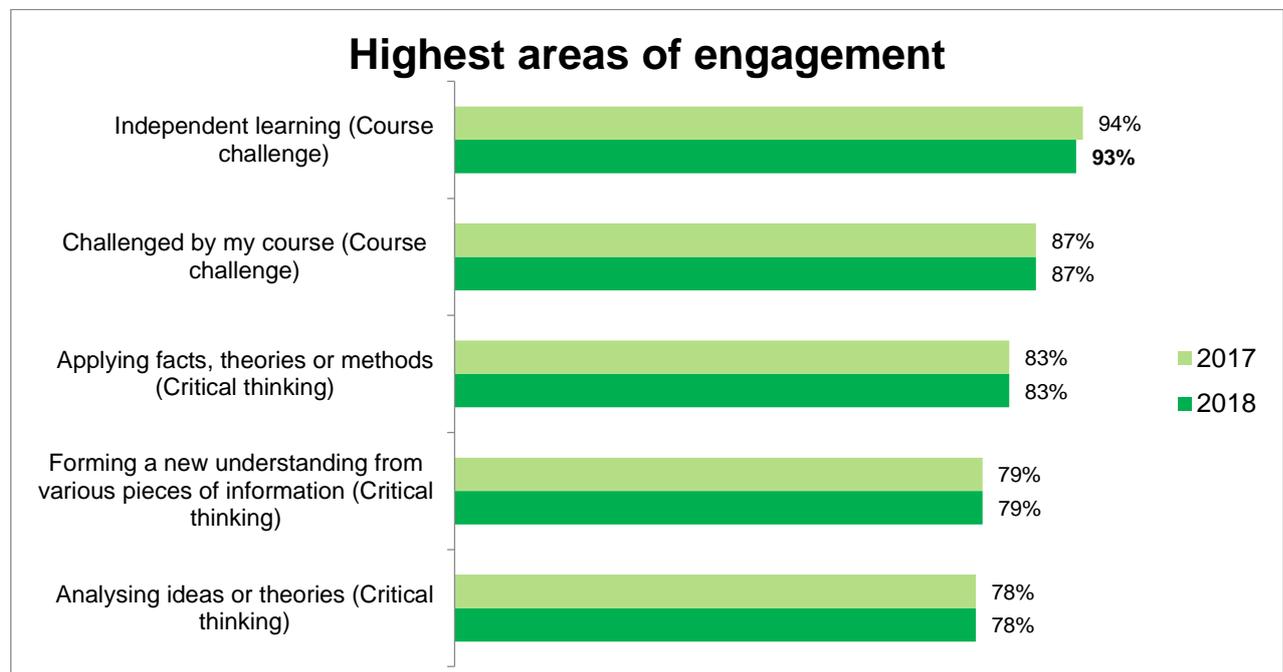
The results emphasise that almost all students feel challenged by their course – something that is generally acknowledged as a positive attribute in terms of their development. Nearly 8 out of 10 undergraduates feel their course engages them in critical-thinking activity, a category which tends to be at the core of most disciplines. Beyond this, relatively high numbers engage in reflecting and connecting, and/or carrying out research or inquiry-based tasks.

By contrast, engagement and collaboration with staff or fellow students is a lot less common. On average just 1 in 3 interact with staff, and 4 out of 10 develop partnerships with their peers. These low levels of engagement point towards a missed opportunity, as it is the collaborative and communicative aspects of these interactions (particularly with staff) which can play a major role in promoting skills development, as we will see later in the report.

In terms of yearly changes, the relative hierarchy across the categories has remained consistent, but there has been a clear and encouraging evolution in levels of engagement. Across several categories, undergraduate students at participating institutions are clearly more likely to engage in their studies, or recognise their engagement, than they were when UKES first launched (the one slight exception to this is course challenge, which is still extremely high). This is particularly the case for interacting with staff, staff-student partnerships and research and inquiry. Given that the range of institutions taking part in UKES has a degree of consistency year on year, such a consistent and positive change among a very large sample is testament to the action taken by institutions to promote the value of engagement among students and staff.

### 3.2 Areas of high and low engagement

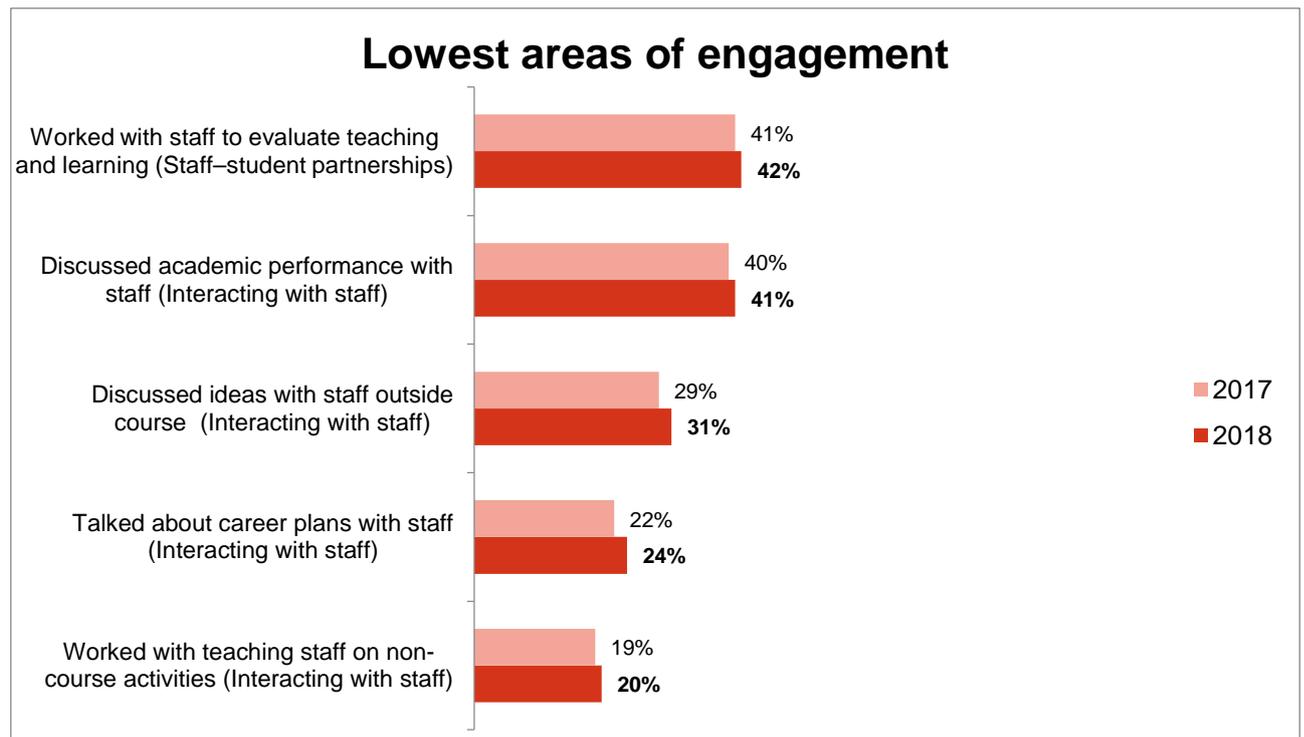
Within each of the above 7 categories, there are a total of 29 individual items, ranging from 2 to 6 within each overall category. Looking across all the items, we can see the specific areas where students engage the most.



*Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.*

Unsurprisingly, these high-engagement areas are within the categories of course challenge and critical thinking, which score highly overall, but it is an interesting and positive finding that almost all students feel that their course emphasises independent learning. In terms of trends, there is very little change, but given the high levels of engagement we would not necessarily expect these to increase notably year on year.

In terms of lower areas of engagement (displayed in the chart below), these are within the generally low-scoring categories of interacting or partnering with staff, however although the scores are still very low, they are all moving in the right direction. Given its importance for skills, a major change in engagement with staff could have a clear impact on student development, so we would encourage continued focus within institutions as to how courses across the board can provide opportunities for students to interact with staff.



*Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.*

### 3.3 Engagement and diversity

In order to compare overall levels of engagement, we have calculated a summed average across the 5 core engagement categories, which we refer to here as “overall engagement”. We have also provided participating institutions with benchmarking results based on this key measure.

Looking at the levels of variation between different student cohorts on this overall measure, we can see a major variation between UK-domiciled students of Black and Mixed ethnicity, while there are also contrasts by age/stage of course and type of study method, with younger students and part-time/distance learners reporting much lower levels of engagement.

There is also striking evidence of how students who have caring or volunteering responsibilities are actually more likely to engage in their studies. This provides food for thought in that, although these activities can impact on the time available for study (as we will see later in section 6), the higher engagement levels imply that caring and volunteering can help develop students’ perspectives and skills which prompt them to take opportunities to engage more in their studies during the time they do have available.

In terms of ethnicity, we saw in the 2017 UKES report how Black students tend to engage very well in their learning, which is also the case in 2018. We have also previously seen how students of Mixed ethnicity tend to engage at lower levels. On similar lines, the recently published Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey 2018<sup>3</sup> also pinpointed a more positive experience (in this case measuring student satisfaction and retention) among UK-domiciled Black students, and a more negative experience among those of Mixed backgrounds. These consistently differing experiences within BME groups, at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, are arguably not fully understood at sector level and hence there appears to be a need for dedicated research to unpick these issues further.

<sup>3</sup> Leman, J. (2018). Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey. Advance HE.

### Student cohorts with highest and lowest overall engagement



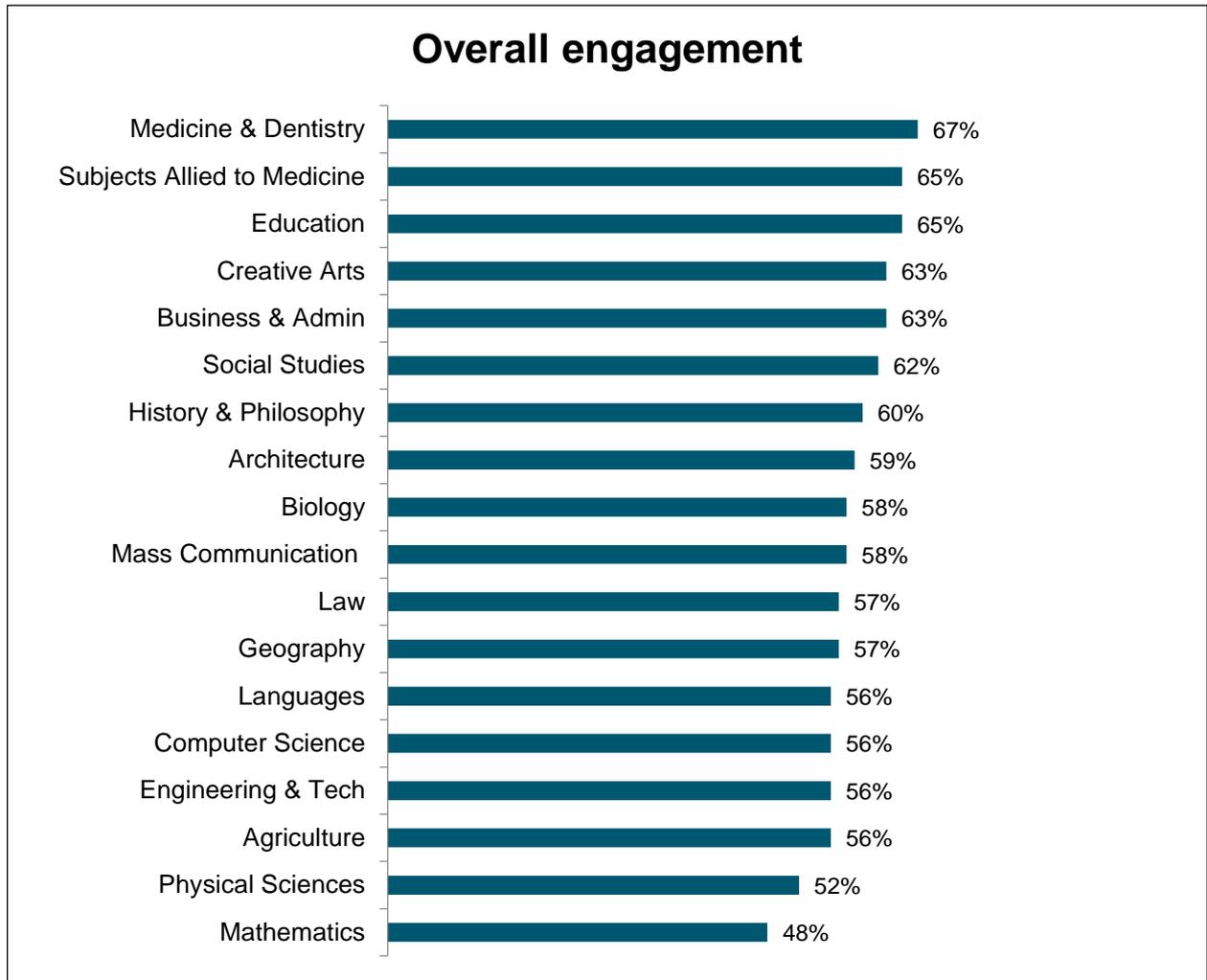
*Base: Black (2,645); Final year (2,441); Carers (6,525); Volunteers (6,991); All respondents (34,635); 21 and under (21,210); Part time (2,350); Mixed (1,148). Distance learner (3,482). Overall engagement calculated from a summed average of engagement with all core items (critical thinking/learning with others/interacting with staff/reflecting and connecting/course challenge).*

### 3.4 Subject-level differences

Measuring engagement by subject area highlights some major differences, as displayed below. We would potentially expect the content of different subjects to emphasise differing aspects of learning. However, the extent of variation across the subjects is perhaps surprising, in that the engagement elements in UKES have been identified as being key elements for a high-quality learning experience irrespective of the discipline studied.

Results for Maths students might be expected to be lower for areas such as research and inquiry which could be more associated with scientific subjects. However, upon further analysis of the different categories (not charted here) it is striking that Maths students are less likely to engage across most aspects, including interacting with staff (24% among Maths students/38% across all students), where we would not necessarily expect a large subject-level difference. By contrast, Maths students are clearly challenged by their course (91% among Maths students/90% across all students).

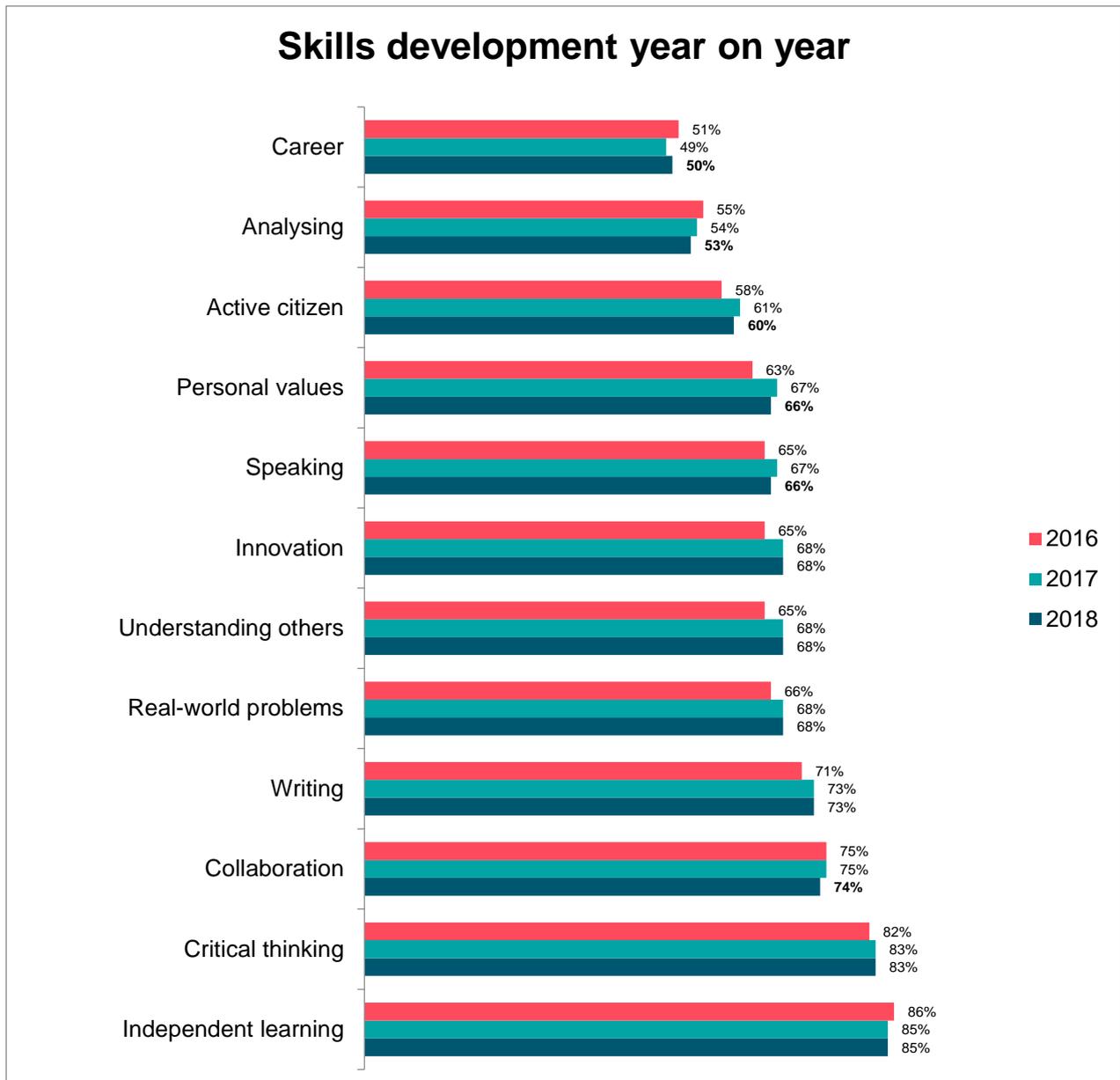
Looking specifically at interaction with staff, which has low engagement overall, it is notable that Creative Arts students (46% engagement – not charted here) are almost twice as likely to collaborate with staff than Maths students (24%). This implies that, beyond the features particular to delivery of this particular subject, there are elements of good practice present at sector level within, in this example, Creative Arts that may potentially be adopted elsewhere to help students engage and develop.



*Base: All respondents per course; Maximum – Subjects Allied to Medicine (5,270); Minimum – Agriculture (196).*

## 4. Skills development

### 4.1 Overall



*Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.*

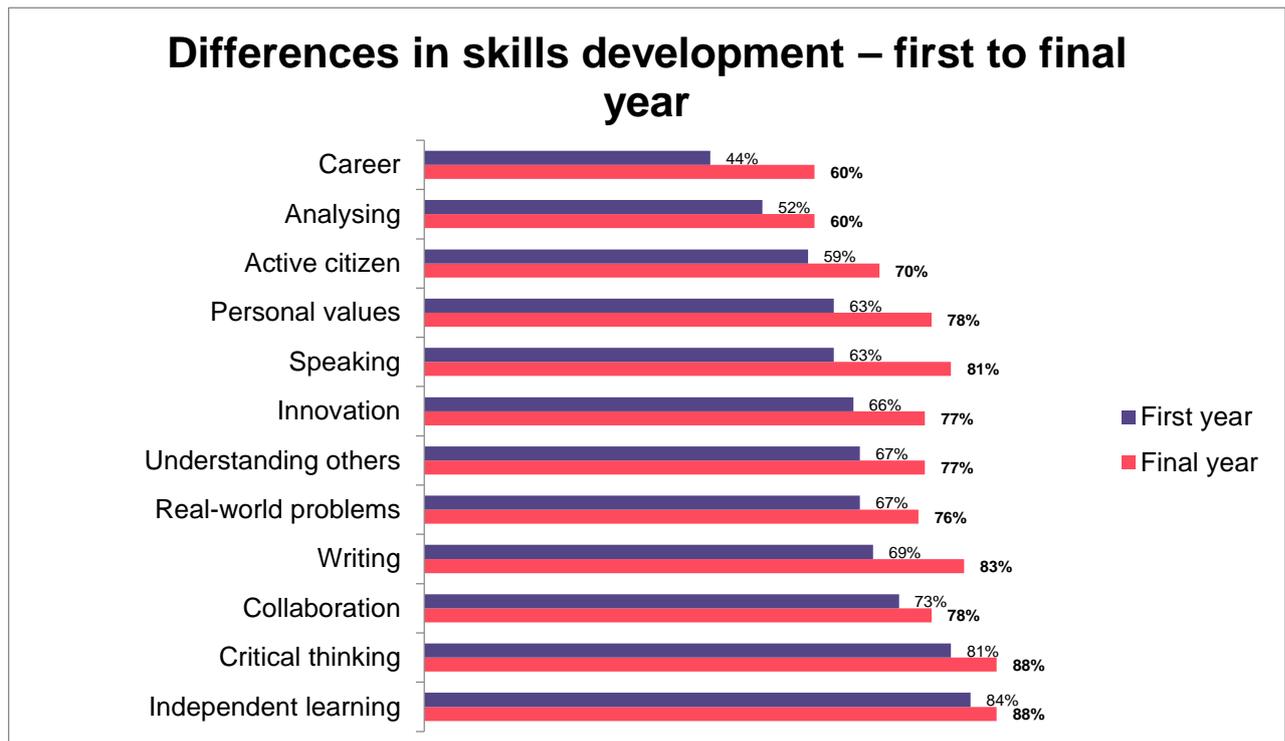
At sector level, the extent to which students report development of skills has remained consistent over time. There are a number of statistical differences between 2017 and 2018 (due to high base sizes a 1% difference is usually significant), but where there has been a yearly change, this is never greater than 1%.

Instead of yearly trends, we therefore need to examine the relative results between the 12 items.

Previous publications of the UKES sector report have identified the relatively low development of career skills, and results are similarly low here. However, given that the majority of respondents are first or second-year students, this is arguably not surprising. What we can do, however, is

identify the types of engagement activity that are most likely to develop career skills, so that this can be maximised across the undergraduate experience – as identified in the next chapter.

Beyond career skills, the “softer” skills such as becoming an active citizen, developing real-world values and understanding others tend to develop at lower rates than “academic” skills such as critical thinking and independent learning. Again, development of softer skills might be expected to occur as students progress through their studies and become exposed to different experiences, advice and opinions, as well as a general evolution as they get older. However, to what extent does the predominance of early undergraduates in UKES explain the lower scores for softer skills?



Base: First year (13,018); Final year (2,186). Statistically significant differences (95% level) in bold.

As presented above, final-year students are more likely to report development of all 12 skills types, but we can clearly see how the “gap” between first and final years is much greater for career skills (16-point gap) as well as “softer” skills – most of which score lower overall, such as becoming an active citizen (11-point gap) and developing personal values (15-point gap). Indeed, there is much less of a difference between the highest and lowest-scoring items among final-year students, which provides evidence as to how their studies help develop a rounded set of skills. By contrast, first-year students report a significant gap between development of core academic skills such as critical thinking and independent learning, and a range of other skills which develop much more strongly by the end of their studies.

These findings highlight the importance of using UKES to track development of skills across different cohorts. Although third-year students are typically less well represented in UKES (due principally to their participation in the National Student Survey [NSS] 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 and also provide context for the reported development of skills among first and second-year students.

## 4.2 How does engagement help develop skills?

Skills item	Top 5 correlations	Engagement section	Correlation value <sup>4</sup>	Engagement
<b>Career skills</b>	1. Discussed career plans with staff	Interacting with staff	0.419	24%
	2. Worked with staff to evaluate teaching practices	Staff–student partnerships	0.372	42%
	3. Worked with staff to make improvements to your course	Staff–student partnerships	0.369	44%
	4. Contributed to a joint community of staff/students	Staff–student partnerships	0.366	43%
	5. Formulating and exploring your own problems or scenarios	Research and inquiry	0.331	61%
<b>Being innovative and creative</b>	1. Formulating and exploring your own problems or scenarios	Research and inquiry	0.448	61%
	2. Made significant changes to your work based on feedback	Interacting with staff	0.403	52%
	3. Examined strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue	Reflecting and connecting	0.390	65%
	4. Changed the way you thought about an issue as a result of what you learned	Reflecting and connecting	0.383	65%
	5. Learned about the outcomes of current research in your subject	Research and inquiry	0.378	66%
<b>Being an informed and active citizen</b>	1. Connecting your learning to real-world problems or issues	Reflecting and connecting	0.426	65%
	2. Formulating and exploring your own problems or scenarios	Research and inquiry	0.424	61%
	3. Learned about the outcomes of current research in your subject	Research and inquiry	0.420	66%
	4. Changed the way you thought about an issue as a result of what you learned	Reflecting and connecting	0.416	65%
	5. Examined strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue	Reflecting and connecting	0.416	65%
<b>Speaking clearly and effectively</b>	1. Formulating and exploring your own problems or scenarios	Research and inquiry	0.402	61%
	2. Learned about the outcomes of current research in your subject	Research and inquiry	0.390	66%
	3. Made significant changes to your work based on feedback	Interacting with staff	0.372	52%
	4. Examined strengths and weaknesses of your own views on a topic or issue	Reflecting and connecting	0.372	65%
	5. Contributed to a joint community of staff/students	Staff–student partnerships	0.366	43%

<sup>4</sup> Statistical definitions using Pearson's 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%.

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 4 skills items, selected to represent the full range of skills covered, from employability (career skills) to active learning skills (innovation), to civic skills (informed and active citizen) to academic skills (speaking).

For each skill, the above table lists the top 5 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.

Across the skills, there are four categories of student engagement that have the largest impact – working in partnership with staff, interacting with staff, reflecting and connecting, and research and inquiry. Indeed, there is a great deal of commonality across the skills areas, with aspects of engagement such as formulating and exploring your own problems or scenarios, making significant changes to your work based on feedback and learning about the outcomes of current research in your subject being most strongly linked to students developing their skills.

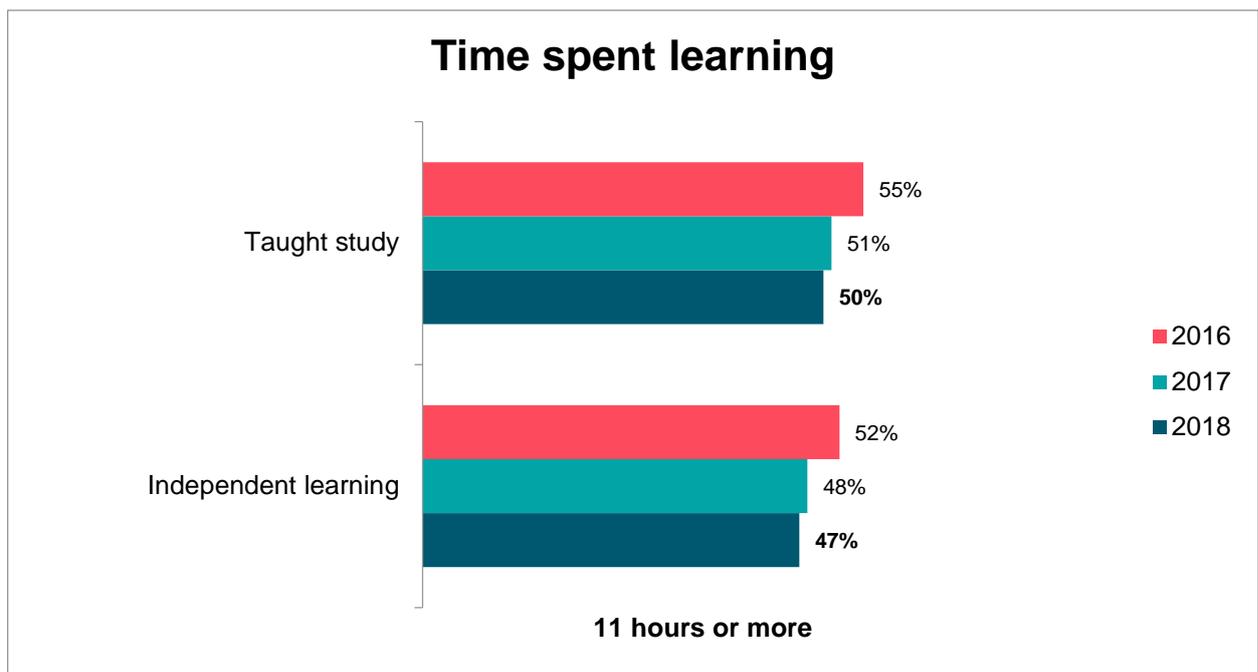
As we have seen, interacting and/or working in partnership with staff happens fairly infrequently compared to other ways in which students engage. Yet the results here imply that by creating more opportunities for students to do this, and communicating the impact this can have, there is a clear opportunity to drive major change in the rate at which students develop their skills – particularly in the area of employability.

What is positive, given these results, is that the 3 main categories of engagement that have increased the most year on year (as we saw in section 3) are all potentially crucial to student skills development (interacting with staff, staff–student partnerships, and research and inquiry), which highlights how institutions are using the learning from UKES to drive changes in how they create opportunities for students to engage.

## 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 students are spending their time, in study and non-study activities. Beginning with academic study, and splitting this into taught and independent learning, we can see that there has been a major decline in the proportion of students spending 11 hours or more at each type of study in a typical week. Although this decline was just 1% in the past year (due to large base sizes this difference is statistically significant), there has been a notable decline in total since 2016.



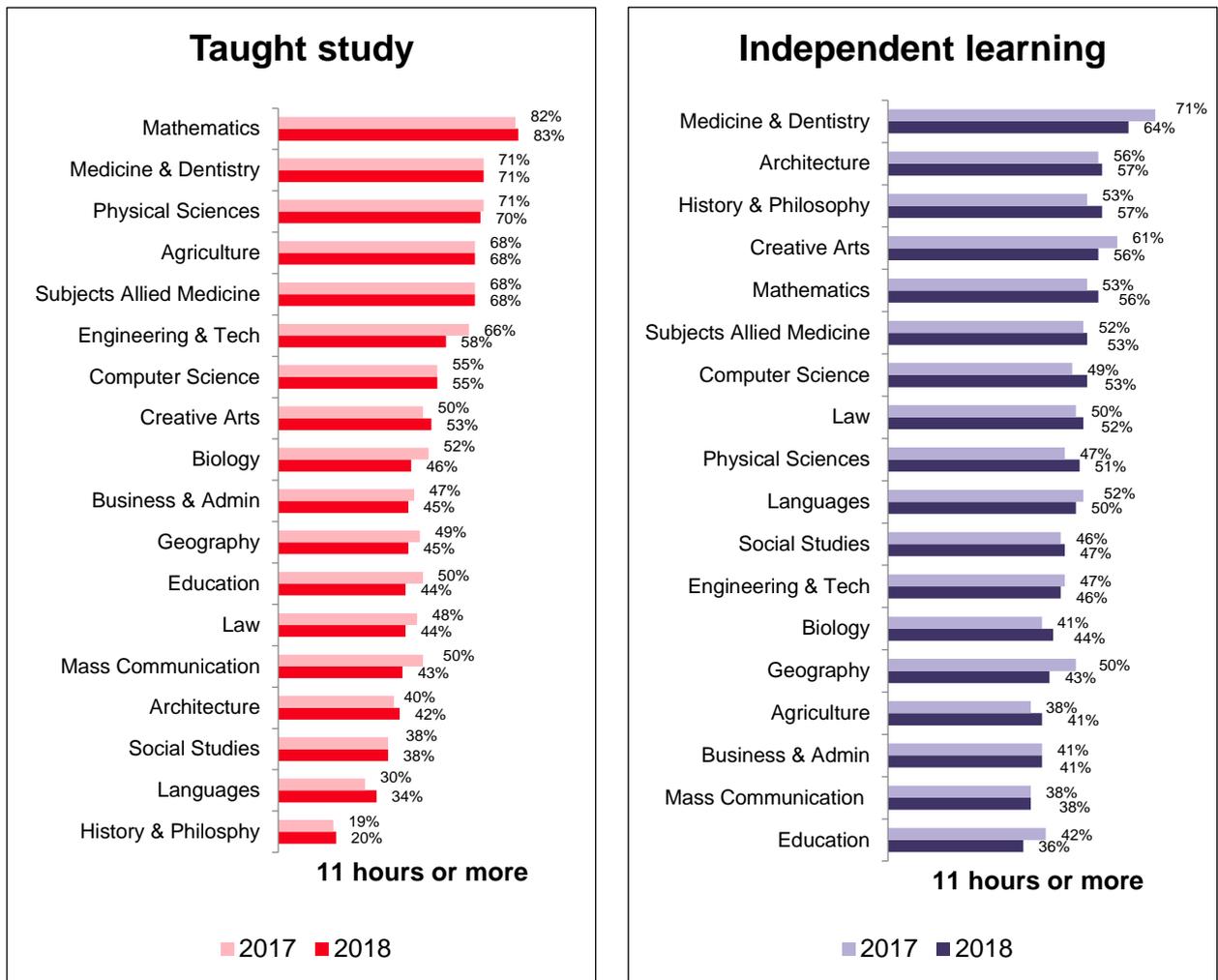
*Base: Taught study (16,263 / 32,662 / 25,641); independent learning (16,228 / 32,419 / 25,633). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.*

The decline in independent study broadly matches what was found in the most recent Student Academic Experience Survey (SAES), by Advance HE and HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute).<sup>5</sup> This survey showed a decline in independent study (measured as a mean average number of hours) between 2015 and 2017. However, the decline in taught study evidenced in UKES is not reflected in the SAES survey, which reports contact hours attended as being very consistent over the past few years.

<sup>5</sup> Neves, J. and Hillman, N. (2018). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI.

## 5.2 Differences by subject

As might be expected, there are significant differences in study time between subject areas. For taught study, the data and relative hierarchy has remained consistent year on year, but for independent learning there have been a number of changes.



Base: All respondents per subject; Maximum – Subjects Allied to Medicine (3,250); Minimum – Agriculture (128). Ranking in order of 2018 data.

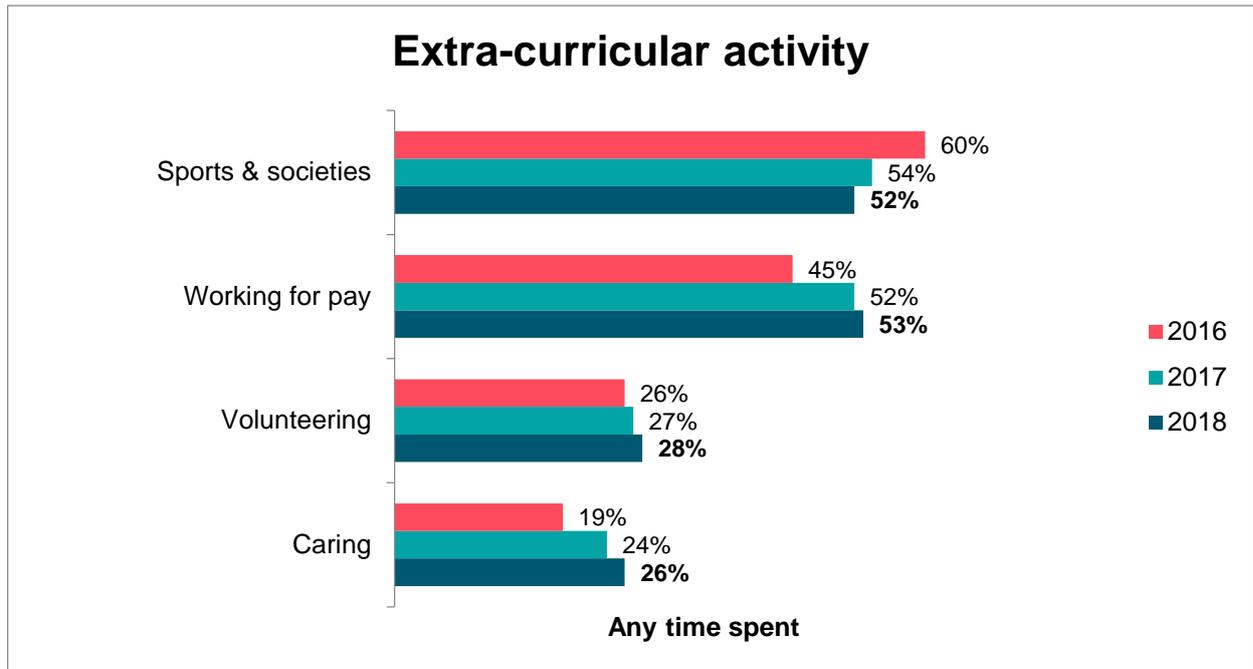
As a broad generalisation, taught study hours are longer in Health, and shorter in Social Sciences and Arts. In terms of independent learning, Health subjects again rank towards the top, together with Arts disciplines, which is in contrast to how Arts subjects rank in terms of taught study.

There are some disciplines, such as Mathematics and Medicine, that involve long hours of both types of study. By contrast, History and Philosophy stands out as having low hours of teaching but high amounts of independent study.

## 6. Extra-curricular activity

### 6.1 Activities and responsibilities

UKES also measures how students spend their time across a range of extra-curricular activities and responsibilities. As well as the 4 areas displayed below, time spent commuting to campus is measured, and this has been covered separately, in detail, in the following chapter.

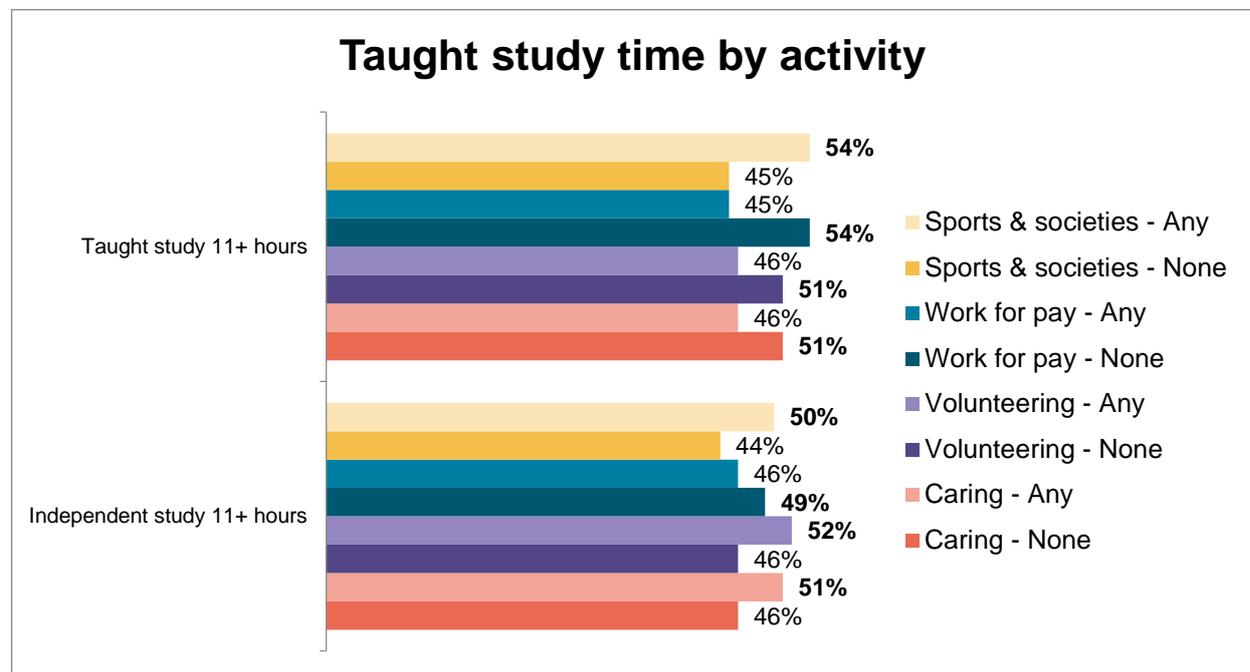


Base: Sports and societies (16,242 / 32,419 / 25,608); Working for pay (16,235 / 32,572 / 25,568); Volunteering (16,151 / 32,391 / 25,468); Caring (16,205 / 32,542 / 25,337). Statistically significant differences (95% level) between 2017 and 2018 in bold.

Comparison across the years identifies that participation in sports and societies is declining steadily (as is study time), while involvement in all other categories is increasing. This implies that students may have less time for social or physical activities (and, as we have seen above, studies) but spend more time on other activities. This finding should be put into context, however, in the light of findings from previous years of UKES that many extra-curricular activities can be strongly developmental for students, particularly volunteering and caring.

## 6.2 The link between study time and non-study activity

Given the steady decline in study time, as well as in sports and societies, and the increase in other activities, we have assessed the data to see whether there appears to be a link.



Base: Sports and societies – Any (13,315); Sports and societies – None (12,234); Work for pay – Any (13,388); Work for pay – None (12,117); Volunteering – Any (6,978); Volunteering – None (18,422); Caring – Any (6,514); Caring – None (18,764). Statistically significant differences between Any/None (95% level) in bold.

What is clear is that there does not appear to be a negative link between time spent participating in sports or societies and time spent studying. In fact, the data suggest the opposite, in that those who participate are more likely (54% compared with 45%) to also spend a lot of time studying. This implies that there are large groups of students who participate strongly across the board, and may potentially possess strong levels of motivation to make the most of a range of study and non-study activities on campus.

In terms of how other extra-curricular activities (i.e. employment, caring, volunteering) link with study workload, the picture is very different – particularly when looking at taught study. Undergraduates who spend time working for pay, volunteering or caring tend to spend less time studying. We can therefore point towards the increase in extra-curricular responsibilities and declining study time potentially being linked, which has implications for how students can be supported to handle competing demands on their time.

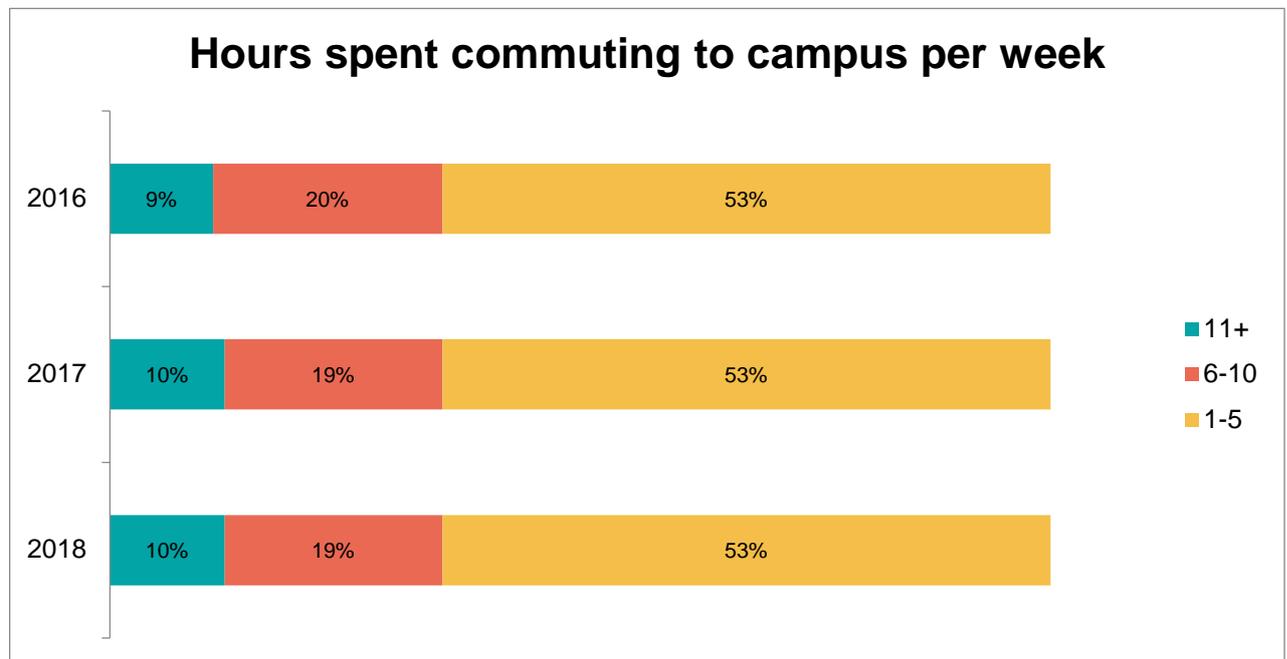
In conducting this analysis, we have framed the narrative in terms of how activities and responsibilities may impact on study time. It is important to recognise, however, that any impact may in fact be in the other direction, in that study demands can impact on the time available to carry out extra-curricular responsibilities which can also be developmental.

## 7. Commuter students

### 7.1 Definition

In the same section as the above items on how students spend their time, UKES contains a question which measures the amount of time spent commuting to campus per week. This is an aspect that has not been focused on in detail in previous sector reports, but it provides an interesting and topical element to bring out here to add to our analysis.

The 2018 Student Academic Experience Survey focused specifically on the challenges faced by students who commute long distances to campus, and HEPI are due to publish a dedicated report looking in more detail at this subject before the end of 2018. Hence, highlighting the UKES data on the extent to which students commute and how this may impact their development can contribute to the wider sector focus on meeting the needs of commuter students.

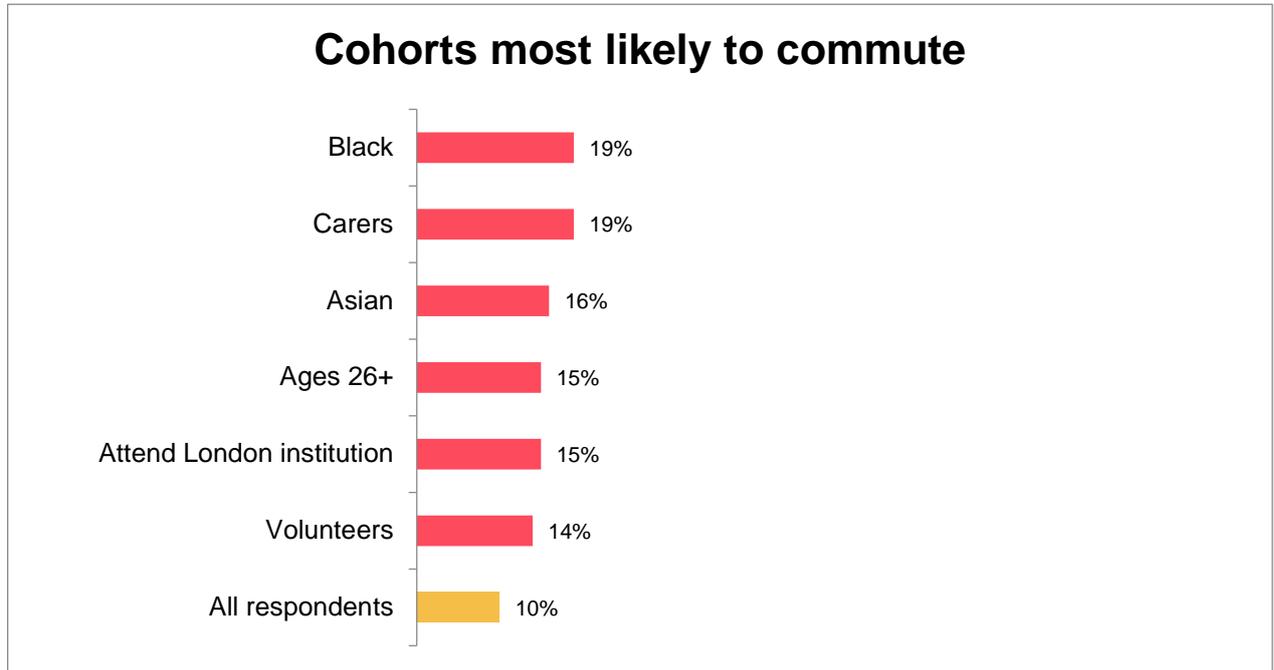


Base: 2016 (16,241) / 2017 (32,631) / 2018 (25,398).

In contrast to the Student Academic Experience Survey referred to above, which measures the *distance* travelled, UKES measures the *time* spent commuting. A relatively small proportion (10%) spend 11 hours or more commuting to campus and this has not changed over time, but for the purposes of this report it is this cohort which we will describe as *commuter students*.

## 7.2 Profile

Although just 1 in 10 students commute in total, there are a number of cohorts where this figure is much higher.



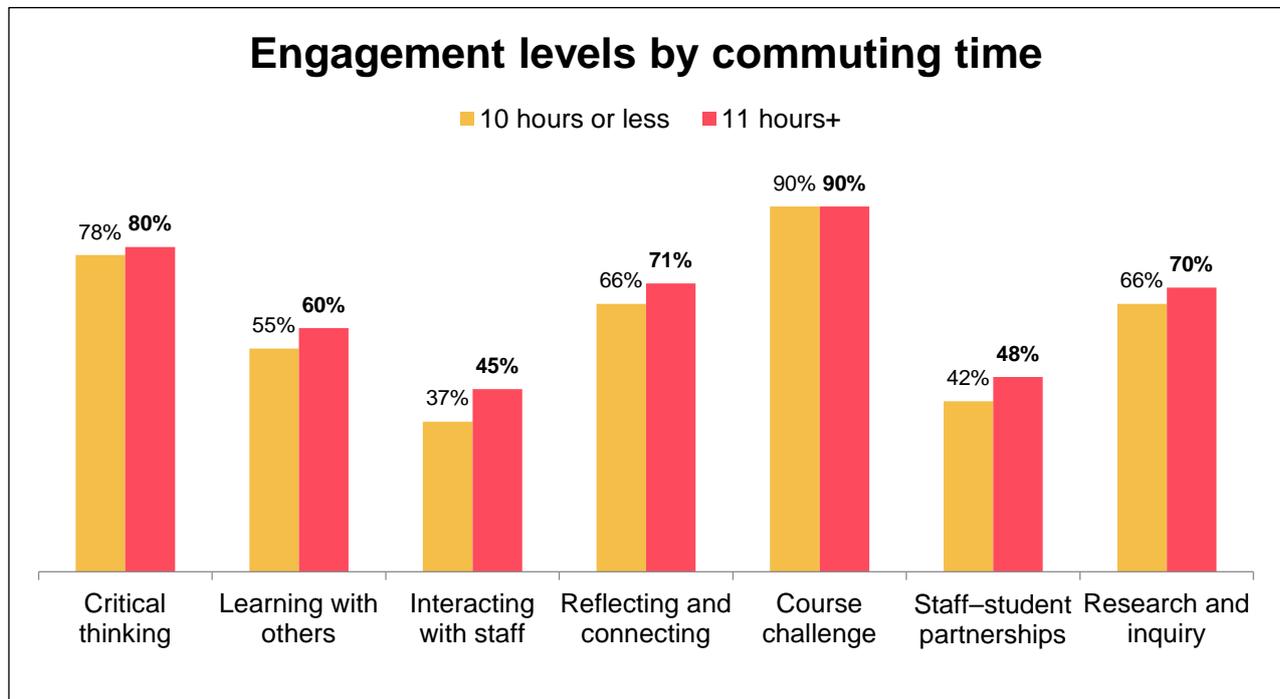
*Base: All respondents (25,398). Chart displays % of each cohort who spend 11 hours or more commuting to campus each week.*

The main theme emerging here is a link with other activities, specifically caring or volunteering, which might be explained by these activities being linked to a need to remain in a particular location in order to fulfil them. Older students are more likely to live in their home area rather than move to be close to their university (and other students), and there is also a link between mature students and caring responsibilities – therefore we may expect older students to be more likely to commute. Geography also plays a role, and the above data embodies the challenges faced by many students in travelling across London.

The other key factor is ethnicity. The Student Academic Experience Survey (referenced above) has identified how high numbers of Asian students live at home, which may explain their strong propensity to commute as shown here. The result among Black students is less immediately explained but what we can say is that commuting does not seem to impact on their experience – as Black students tend to engage the most (as shown earlier in section 3 of this report).

### 7.3 Engagement

Commuting is a demand on time, and therefore unlike volunteering and working for pay, is not an active choice to help development. We may therefore predict that this could have a negative link with how students engage, but this is not borne out by the data.



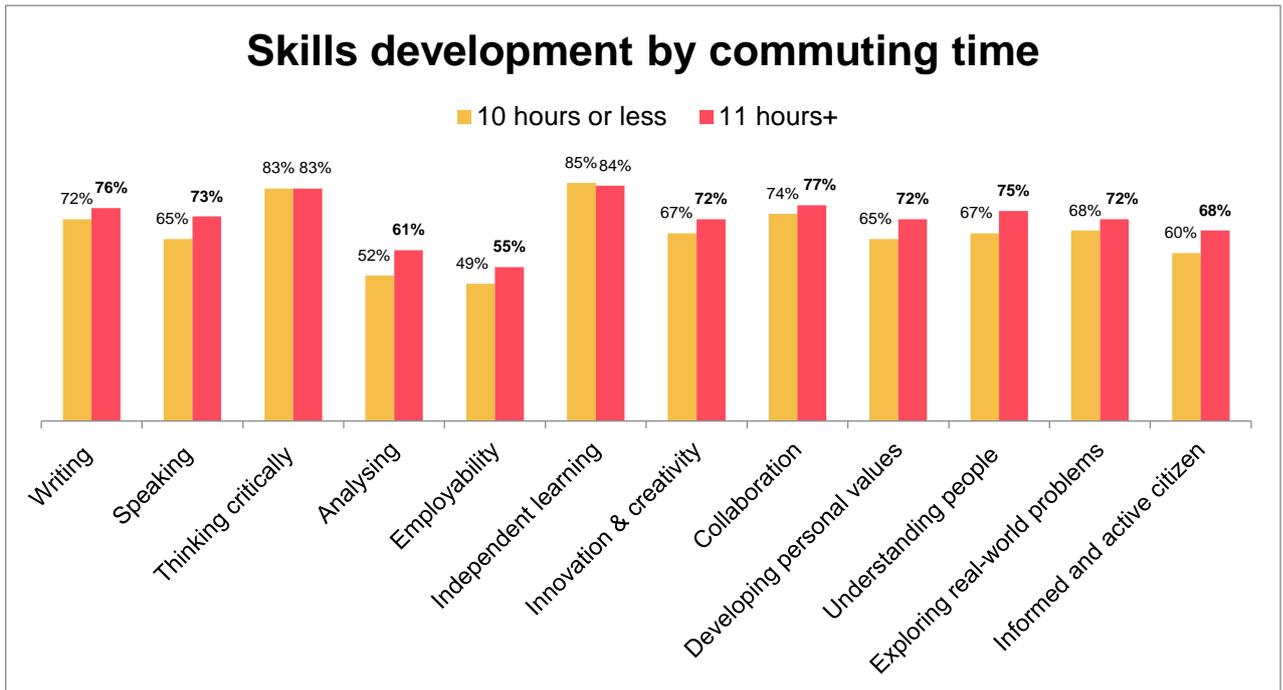
*Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) in bold.*

In fact, commuter students are significantly more likely to engage across the board, being particularly more likely to collaborate with staff. The reasons behind this are not immediately evident, but this data is consistent with one of the themes that we see each year in UKES – that if students put more in then they get more out. In this case there is more effort made to get to campus but this implies that the students who do commute are often motivated to take the opportunities available to them when they get there.

### 7.4 Skills development

The theme emerging from the data is that commuter students are generally very successful in balancing the demands on their time, and are often highly motivated in their studies and commitment to their development.

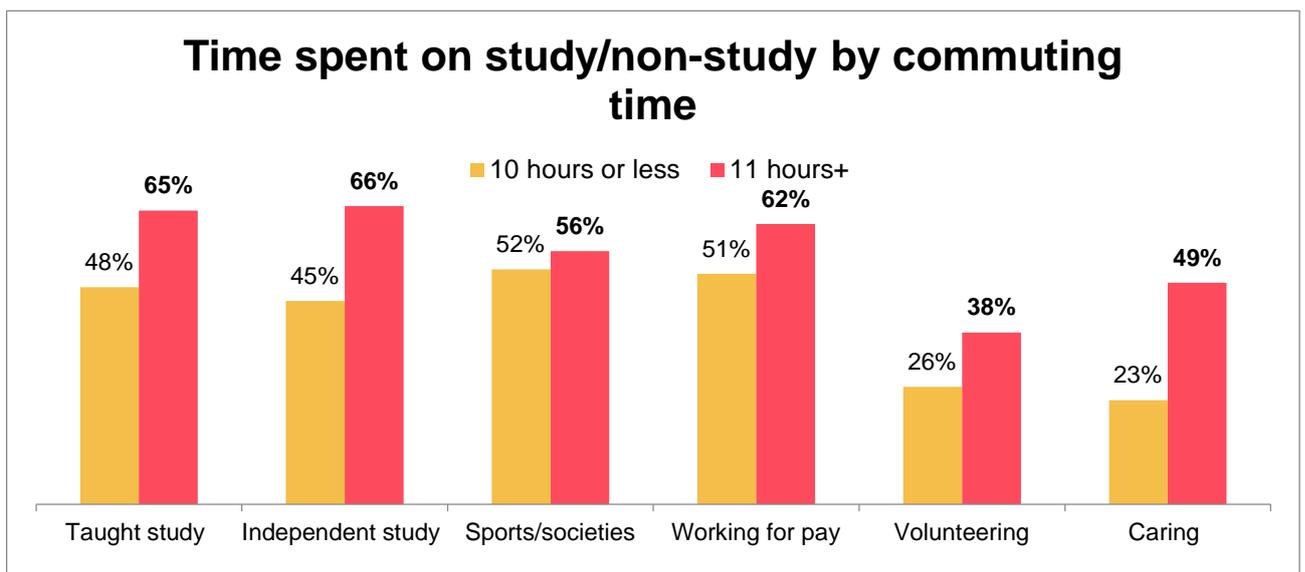
This is emphasised by both charts below, which provide evidence of how commuting does not appear to be a burden to limit learning time or development. Commuter students are significantly more likely to develop their skills in 10 out of the 12 skills areas covered – with very high scores for the remaining two skills.



Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) in bold.

## 7.5 Time spent

As well as being more likely to have wider responsibilities, commuter students also spend much more time in both taught and independent study. Using commuter time effectively may partly explain this, but in general this focus on commuter students points to a cohort of undergraduates with high levels of motivation, organisation and commitment.



Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) in bold. Data for taught study/independent study is based on participation levels of 11 hours or more. Data for non-study areas is based on any level of participation.

## 8. Participation background

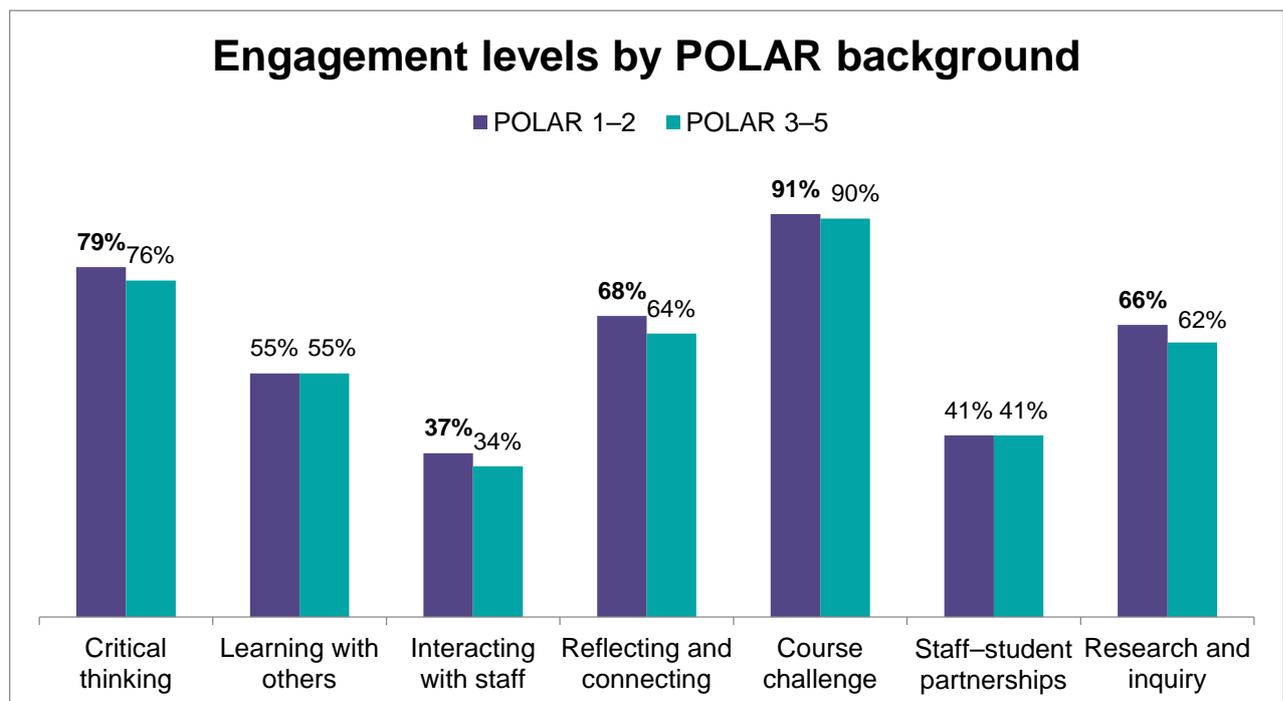
### 8.1 Engagement

To add a further dimension to the analysis this year, we have examined the link between the geographical background of students participating in UKES and the overall levels of engagement and skills development reported.

Students in England participating in UKES were asked to provide the postcode of their parental address, which enabled us to assign each student to a Participation of Local Areas (POLAR<sup>6</sup>) code.

The POLAR classification, developed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), is based on the propensity of young people in their home neighbourhood to participate in higher education. Geographic areas are classified into five groups, or quintiles.

Quintile 1 represents the lowest participation and quintile 5 the highest. For analysis purposes we have further grouped the quintiles into low participation (quintiles 1–2) and higher participation (quintiles 3–5), which we have used to compare overall engagement and skills development to identify whether a student’s background and levels of participation are linked.



*Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) in bold.*

Students from lower-participation neighbourhoods are more likely to engage in many aspects of their learning, including critical thinking, reflecting and connecting, research and inquiry and the key aspect of interacting with staff.

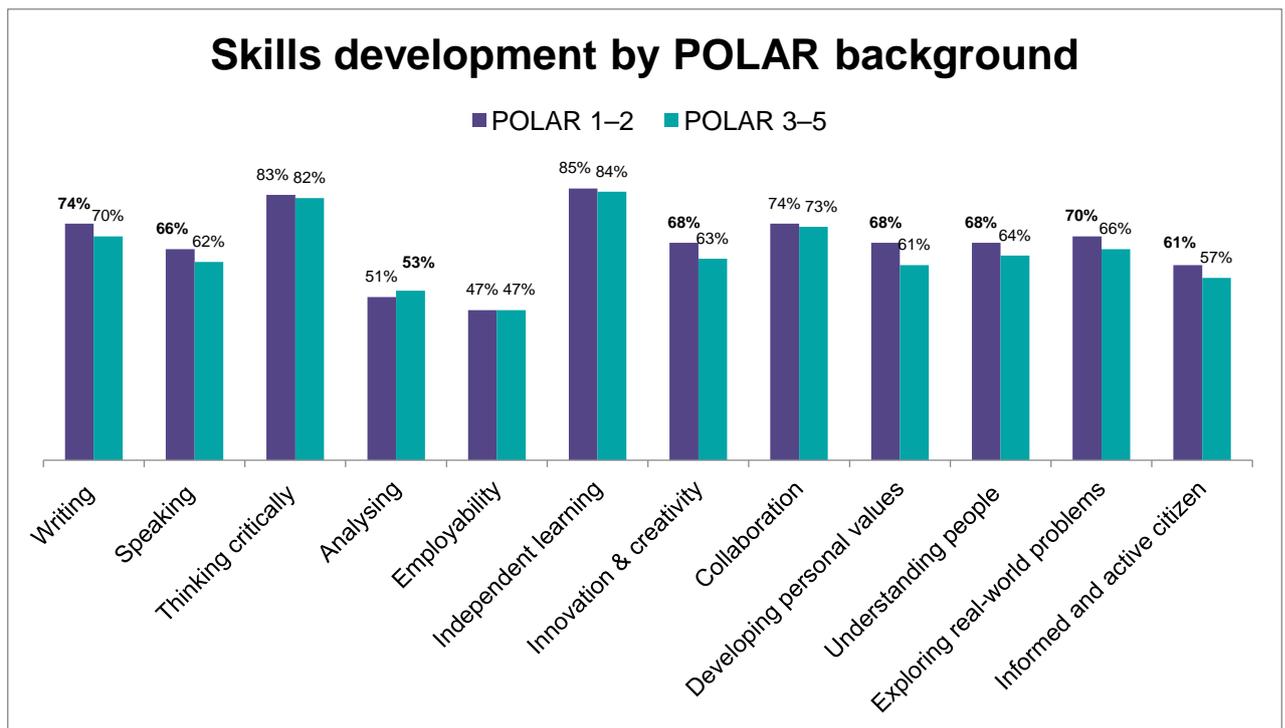
6

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20180319120750/http://www.hefce.ac.uk/analysis/yp/POLAR/Map.of.young.participation.areas/>

A potential explanation for this is that students may be less likely to know what to expect from university study as a result of their background, and hence they engage as much as possible in order to give themselves the best opportunity.

## 8.2 Skills development

Reported skills development is also generally higher among undergraduates from low-participation backgrounds. In 7 skills categories there is a positive significant difference, with particularly large differences in terms of developing personal values, and innovation. For 4 skills items there is no difference between POLAR categories, while developing analytical skills is the one aspect where students from high-participation areas are more likely to feel they have developed.



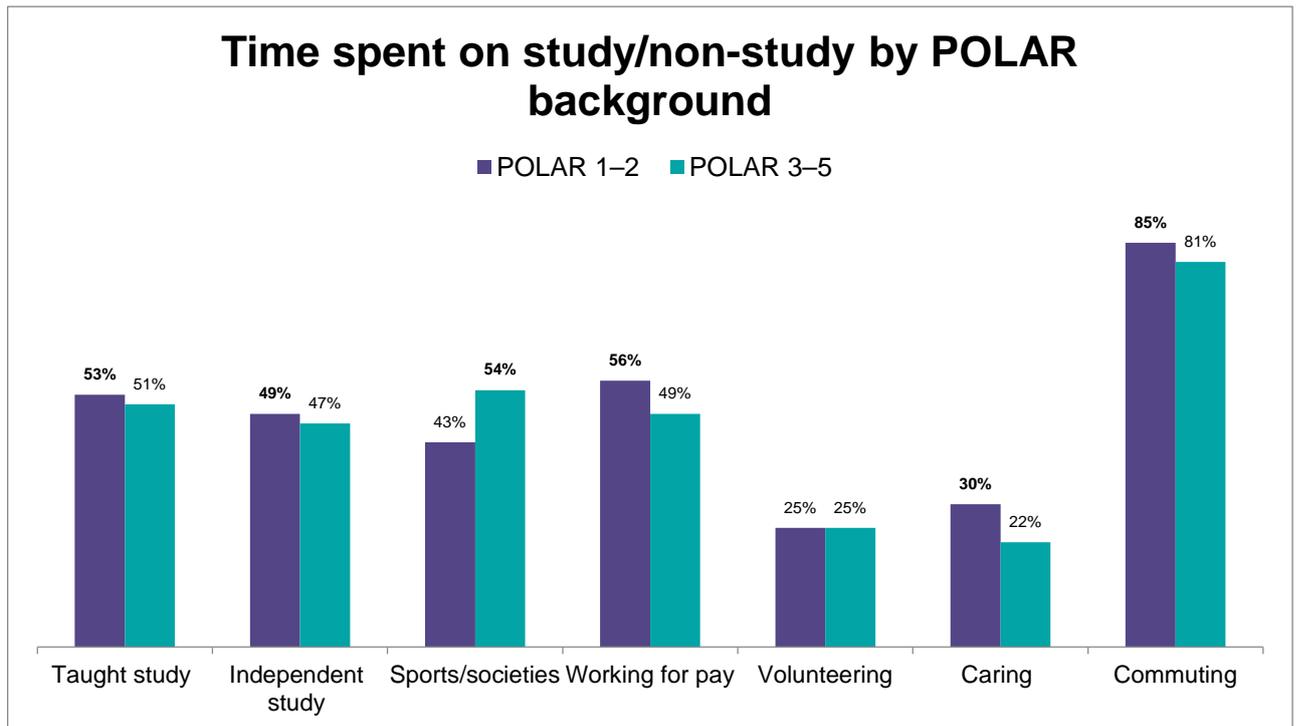
Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) in bold.

## 8.3 Time spent

Looking now at activities and responsibilities, as charted below, there are some striking findings. Time spent in both taught and non-taught study is higher among students from POLAR backgrounds 1–2. This is logical given the above findings on engagement, in that students who engage more are likely to be spending more time in doing so. It also fits with the profile of a group of students who are keen to give themselves the best possible opportunity.

In terms of non-study activity, low-participation students are significantly more likely to be carers, and to spend time commuting. This points towards students from lower socio-economic backgrounds facing a range of challenges which impact on their time.

However, as we also found with commuter students, the data implies that those students facing the greatest demands on their time can often be the most resourceful and determined. We should also point out that there is a degree of overlap between commuter students and low-participation groups, and therefore there are some similarities in the findings around their relatively high levels of engagement, development and participation.



*Base: All respondents. Base sizes vary per section. Statistically significant differences (95% level) in bold. Data for taught study/independent study is based on participation levels of 11 hours or more. Data for non-study activities is based on any level of participation.*

By contrast to the other categories surveyed, the one area where low-participation students are least likely to take part is involvement in extra-curricular sports and societies. Here, students from high-participation backgrounds are much more likely to take part (54%), with in fact less than half of low-participation students (43%) taking the opportunity to spend time in this way.

This is unfortunate in that sports and societies can play a key role in wider skills development and can help students integrate into wider aspects of university life. To some extent, involvement in caring and volunteering, as well as commuting time, is likely to impact on priorities, and hence lack of involvement in one area may be expected as a trade-off. However, another potential explanation may lie in the notion that a background of low participation (which may relate to immediate friends and family, as well as the wider neighbourhood) may lead to students being less aware of the benefits and advantages of participation in university sports and societies, and a lower propensity to prioritise these or make themselves aware of what is on offer.

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## 9. Conclusions

This report has identified, through correlation analysis, where student engagement most leads to skills development, providing evidence that by continuing to encourage students to engage with staff, and to conduct inquiry based-learning, institutions will be able to help students develop a rounded set of skills.

The report also sheds light on student motivation, in particular how commuter students and those from low-participation backgrounds display high levels of involvement across the board.

Study time is declining, and with the exception of the student cohorts mentioned above, the data implies that this may often be related to increased time in extra-curricular activities, specifically working for pay, volunteering, or caring. It is to be expected that students will need, or want, to spend time in this way, but there is a clear need for institutions to help provide support to those with high time commitments outside their studies to ensure they have every opportunity to devote the required amount of time to their studies.

Along with study time, another area that appears to be declining is the level of involvement in sports and societies. These activities have often been seen as a core feature of a rounded undergraduate experience but are declining year on year, while time spent on other activities, as mentioned above, is increasing.

It is also striking that students from low-participation backgrounds do not tend to get heavily involved in sports and societies, despite exhibiting high levels of engagement and involvement in most other areas. In order to ensure that all students have the opportunity to benefit from a fully rounded experience, institutions may need to consider how best to communicate the variety of opportunity offered, particularly to students who are the first in their family to go to university and/or may be juggling a range of other commitments.

The consistent increase in levels of engagement shows the benefits of annual tracking through UKES, which can identify where interventions are needed to drive enhancement at institutional level. Student engagement can be more challenging to interpret than more traditional satisfaction-based measures, but the evidence showcased in this report highlights the benefits of continuing to dedicate resources to its measurement.

# 10. Appendix

## 10.1 Demographics

Category	Characteristic	Responses	UKES 2018
Gender	Male	11,282	33%
	Female	23,275	67%
Age	21 and under	21,210	62%
	22–25	5,117	15%
	26+	7,653	23%
Fee status	UK	26,960	87%
	EU	2,183	7%
	Non-EU	1,693	6%
Ethnicity (UK domicile)	White	23,215	77%
	BME	6,818	23%
Mode	Full-time	32,269	93%
	Part-time	2,350	7%
Year	Foundation	1,645	5%
	1	15,036	44%
	2	13,250	39%
	3+	4,104	12%

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

## 10.2 Institutions

Category	Type	UKES 2018 Responses	UKES 2018 %
Benchmark group	Pre-92	5,941	17%
	Post-92	28,045	81%
	Universities Alliance	9,891	29%
	Guild HE	2,398	7%
	Cathedrals Group	9,022	26%
	London	3,279	9%



## Contact us

+44 (0) 3300 416201

[enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@advance-he.ac.uk)

[www.advance-he.ac.uk](http://www.advance-he.ac.uk)

   @AdvanceHE

If you would like further information about PRES, PTES or UKES please email:

[surveys@advance-he.ac.uk](mailto:surveys@advance-he.ac.uk) or call

**01904 717500**

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