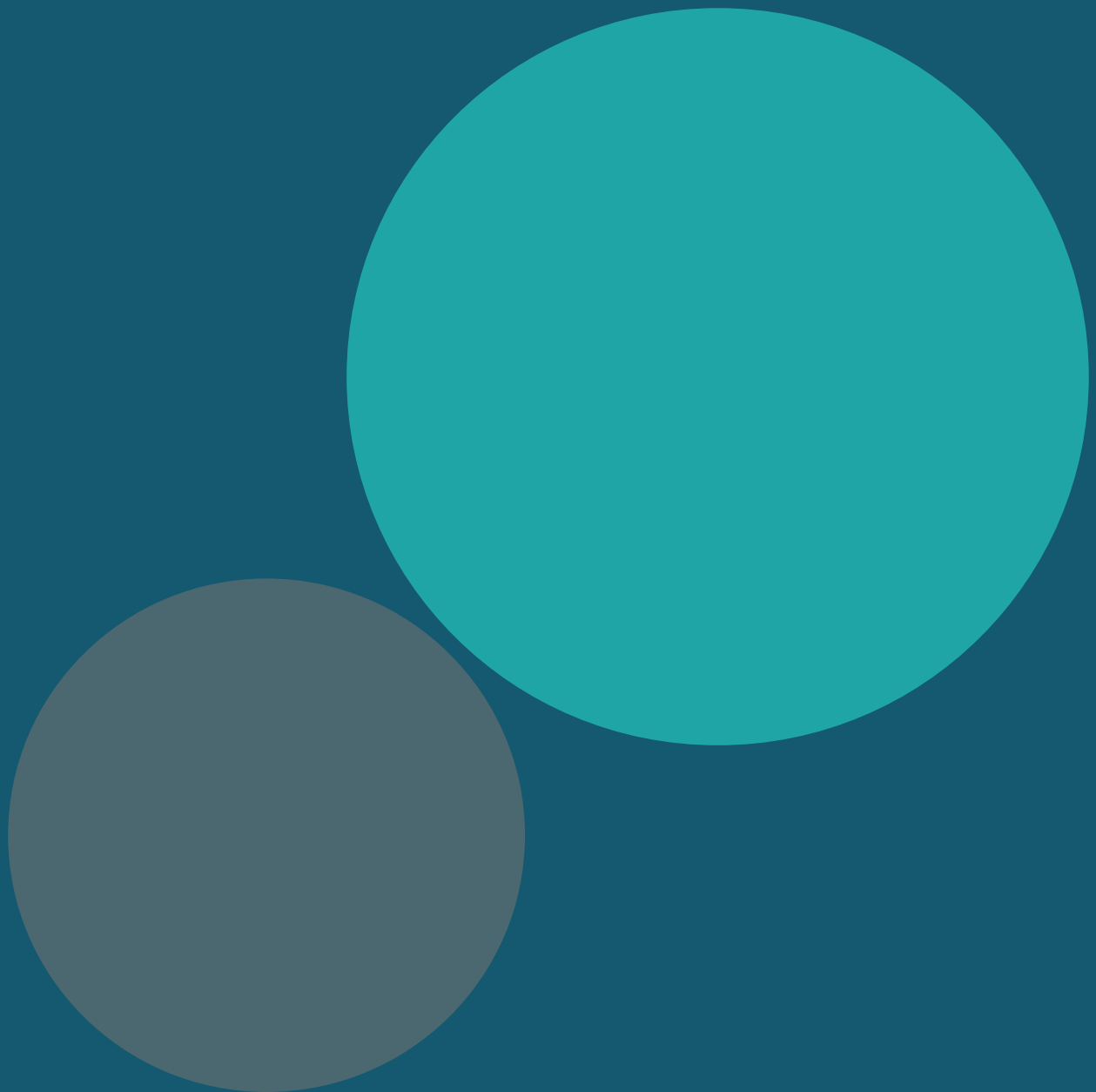


2020
**UK Engagement
Survey**

Jonathan Neves

 **AdvanceHE**



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1 Executive Summary

The 2020 UK Engagement Survey period straddled a time when the higher education sector – and society in general – faced major upheaval due to the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Institutions had to move to virtual delivery at unprecedented speed, while students themselves faced challenges in their wider lives around family, caring, living arrangements as well as changes in their learning experience.

We have seen from the Advance HE–HEPI (Higher Education Policy Institute) Student Academic Experience Survey how this impacted, both positively and negatively, on a range of aspects of the academic experience, but UKES enables us to complement this by understanding the effect on student engagement levels as well as on how students spend their time.

Overall levels of engagement with staff continue to be relatively low, which is unfortunate given how developmental these interactions can be. However, there is evidence that working with staff actually increased during lockdown, across a range of sample groups (over and above a difference in the demographic profile between the two survey periods), as levels of support and interaction came into their own in a predominantly virtual environment. The lockdown period is also linked with higher levels of engagement on aspects of research and inquiry, although interaction with other students has, perhaps understandably, declined.

Students surveyed during lockdown reported much lower levels of participation in taught classes or supervision sessions. By contrast, time spent working for pay is much higher among responses from the lockdown period, and the proportion of students spending time caring for others has nearly doubled – emphasising the pressures and responsibilities faced by students away from their learning.

Encouragingly, despite the upheaval and challenges faced by all, students taking part during lockdown were slightly less likely to have considered leaving their course, which is a positive endorsement of the significant efforts made by institutions to maintain levels of quality and support.

In a new area of analysis for 2020, this report places the spotlight on how students' living arrangements and commuting distance links with levels of engagement. What is striking, in fact, is that there appears to be no detrimental impact of a long commute on how a student engages or develops. Likewise, living alone and/or away from other students is actually linked with slightly higher levels of engagement or development than the more traditional model of living close to others. As the analysis shows, age appears to be a key factor in this, with older students – who tend to be those living far away from campus and not with other students – showing that their levels of motivation and organisation can overcome some of the potential barriers posed by distance or circumstances.

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 confidential results to help drive enhancement of teaching and learning. Data can be used to identify areas of learning and development where students are spending their time and engaging, as well as where they are not spending as much time as intended. 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 engagement or development is relatively low.

There are seven overall 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).

¹ Copyright 2001–2020, The Trustees of Indiana University.

2.2 Content

Status	Theme	Question area	Question items	2020 sector responses (minimum) ²
Core	Engagement	Critical thinking	4	13,859
Core	Engagement	Learning with others	4	13,872
Core	Engagement	Interacting with staff	6	13,845
Core	Engagement	Reflecting and connecting	6	13,842
Core	Engagement	Course challenge/ independent learning	2	13,883
Optional	Engagement	Research and inquiry	4	9,535
Optional	Engagement	Staff–student partnerships	3	9,999
Optional	Skills development	Learning skills, Creative and social skills	12	10,912
Optional	Time spent	Academic work	2	12,725
Optional	Time spent	Extra-curricular activity	5	12,702

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 benchmark results in order for participating institutions to compare the results of their students relative to others, which can help pinpoint where action may be needed.

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

2.2.1 Skills development items

Some of the analysis in this report groups together the skills development items into two overall categories of six items each – Learning skills/Creative and social skills. These categories are specified below.

Skills development item	Category
Writing	Learning skills
Speaking	
Thinking critically	
Analysing	
Career skills	
Independent learning	
Being innovative and creative	Creative and social skills
Working effectively with others	
Developing personal values or ethics	
Understanding people of other backgrounds	
Exploring complex real-world problems	
Being an informed and active citizen	

2.3 How the questions are asked

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

For example, 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, and where they have been directed or encouraged to focus their attention. 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 who spent 11 hours or more (study activity), and the percentage of students who spent any time at all (extra-curricular activity).

Theme	Question area	Scale	Question type	Data reported		
Engagement (Core)	Critical thinking	4 point	How much has your course emphasised activities?	Top 2 points in scale – very much/quite a bit		
Engagement (Core)	Learning with others		How often have you done activities?	Top 2 points in scale – very often/often		
Engagement (Core)	Interacting with staff					
Engagement (Core)	Reflecting and connecting					
Engagement (Core)	Course challenge/ independent learning				How much has your course emphasised activities?	Top 2 points in scale – very much/quite a bit
Engagement (Optional)	Research and inquiry					
Engagement (Optional)	Staff–student partnerships					
Skills development (Optional)	Learning skills, Creative and social skills	4 point			How much has your overall student experience contributed?	Top 2 points in scale – very much/quite a bit
Time spent (Optional)	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 (Optional)	Extra-curricular activity	8 point (ranges of hours)		Top 7 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.

At the beginning of 2020, participation levels were on schedule to match 2019, but with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic, a number of institutions were unable to take part in the survey as planned.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Institutions	24	29	42	38	31	18
Participants	24,387	23,198	35,927	34,635	29,784	13,915
Average per institution	1,016	800	855	911	960	773

Accordingly, participation was lower than is usually the case, but the relatively high number of students taking part within each institution contributes to what is still one of the largest undergraduate surveys in the UK higher education sector.

2.5 Timing of fieldwork

UKES 2020 was open for institutions to run from February to June 2020. This meant that a significant part of the fieldwork took place before Covid-19 restrictions impacted significantly on university life – and indeed society in general – while a significant number of responses were completed after restrictions were imposed and much of teaching moved online. This provides the opportunity to compare and contrast how students responded across the two periods.

As with all our sector surveys this year, we have selected 16 March (when tougher restrictions on life in the UK were announced and by when many higher education institutions had moved their teaching online) as the key date to use in our analysis of this – highlighting in this report, where relevant, how results vary between both periods.

Dates	Number of interviews	Percentage
Pre-16 March (“Pre-lockdown”)	10,730	77%
Post-16 March* (“During lockdown”)	3,185	23%

*Includes 16 March.

Although the questions in the survey ask students to consider their experience “on average” across the year, or in a typical week, it is to be expected that the answers will be influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the prevailing situation when the survey took place, and hence the comparison between these two survey periods would be expected to highlight some differences in how students were engaging in academic and wider activities.

2.6 Profile of different fieldwork periods

	Pre-lockdown (10,730)	During lockdown (3,185)
Women	67%	68%
Men	30%	29%
White	75%	62%
BAME³	25%	38%
Face to face	91%	90%
Distance learner	9%	10%
Foundation year	7%	13%
1st year	47%	34%
2nd year	38%	35%
3rd year+	8%	18%

Most notable differences highlighted in bold.

As we will see later in this report, we have compared all main aspects of engagement and skills development between the key fieldwork periods detailed above, with the aim of understanding whether the spring “lockdown” appears to have impacted positively or negatively on how students engage.

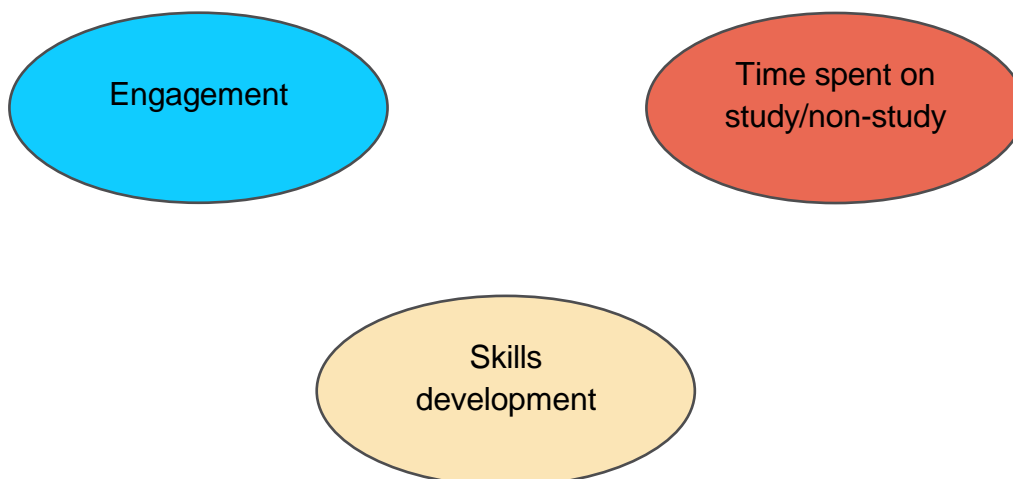
When doing this, however, it is important to recognise and understand that the profiles of the students taking part in the survey across these periods do differ – significantly on some aspects. This is understandable in that some institutions took part in the survey early in the period and others took part later, and hence the demographic distribution will naturally reflect the different types of institution taking part at different times. While the sample is remarkably consistent in terms of gender and mode of learning, there are some differences by ethnicity – with a much higher proportion of BAME students taking part during lockdown. There are also contrasts by year of study – with the lockdown period featuring high volumes of foundation year and final year students.

³ Our main ethnicity analysis (across the total sample period) is conducted using UK-domicile data – as is standard practice. However, when comparing sample profiles across the two time periods we have included all ethnicity data to provide a more comprehensive comparison.

We will see later on that there are contrasting results between these time periods in terms of engagement and skills development. These profile differences do not mean that any difference in experience across the time periods should be disregarded, but we also need to recognise the extent to which profile differences could also be driving this – something that we have focused on in our analysis.

2.7 How results are reported

As outlined above, there are three main sections in UKES – engagement, skills development and time spent on activities. For each section, this report focuses on the comparison of the different items within each section among the student population as a whole, and also conducts a deeper dive into the data.

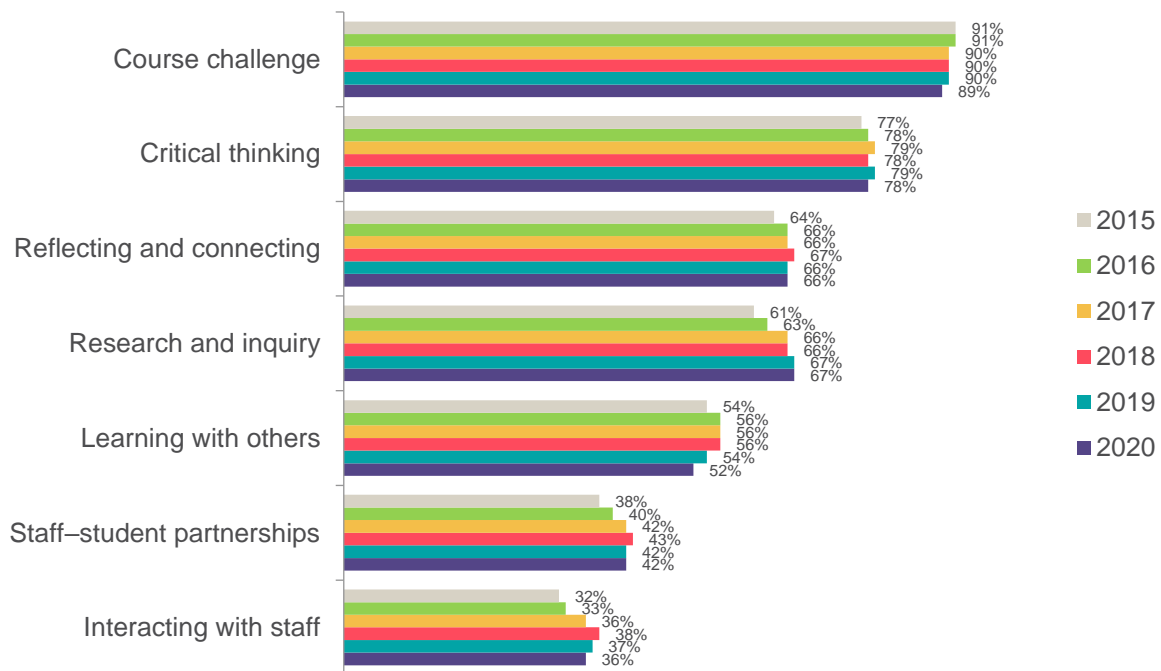


3 Engagement

3.1 Overall

There are seven categories of engagement measured by UKES, comprising 29 individual question items, and with six full years of robust data we can compare against each other, as well as over time.

Student engagement – overall categories



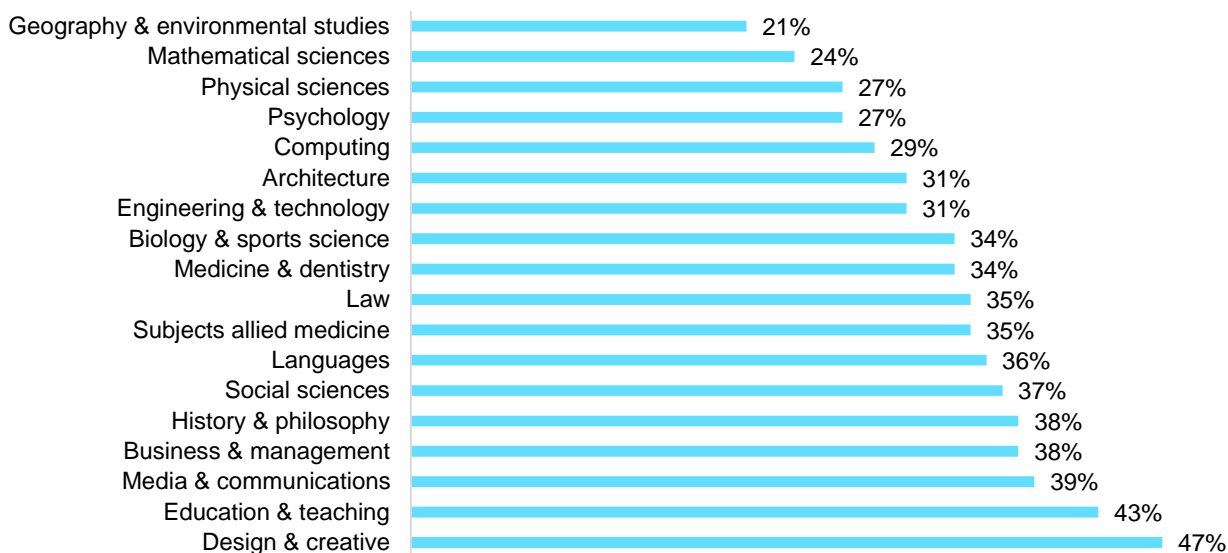
Ideally, we would hope to see high levels of engagement across all of the above categories, as all are included in the survey because they are recognised as being key contributors to high-quality learning.

Encouragingly, we do see high engagement in core items such as Critical thinking and Course challenge, which is positive evidence of high-quality learning. As we have seen before, however, students are spending limited amounts of time engaging with staff and other students, with these results over several years providing clear evidence that many undergraduate courses do not always place this aspect of interaction at the core of their curricula. Thinking in particular of partnering and interacting with staff, these aspects are particularly critical as they have been identified in previous UKES analysis as linking very strongly to the development of career skills and also to retention.⁴

⁴ Neves, J (2019). UK Engagement Survey. Advance HE, pp 18 - 28.

Potentially, we would expect to see some differences by discipline, as some disciplines are inherently more suited to this level of engagement with staff.

Interacting with staff – by discipline



Discipline analysis based on HECOS CAH 1 codes⁵

This is borne out by the data in the chart above, based on the statements within the category of Interacting with staff. Results show a 26 percentage point difference between the subject with highest engagement (Design) and the one with lowest engagement (Geography & environmental studies).

In general, social science and arts subjects tend to facilitate the highest interaction with staff, while STEM subjects report very low levels of engagement on this key theme. What is striking however is that for all subjects, even those at the top of the list, fewer than 50% of students feel they have fairly high or high levels of interaction with staff. There therefore appears to be scope for institutions to do more to enable and encourage students to work with and learn from staff, within all discipline areas, to help contribute to overall levels of development.

UKES collects a wide range of free text comments across all aspects of engagement. These are provided directly to participating institutions to complement the quantitative results. The comments below provide a snapshot of experiences – both good and bad – in terms of interacting and partnering with staff.

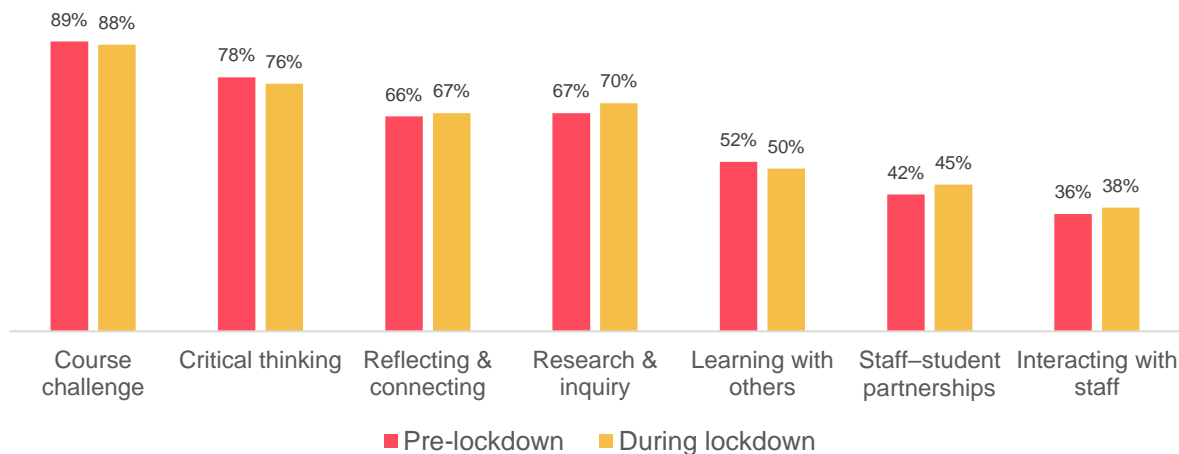
⁵ Source: www.hesa.ac.uk/innovation/hecos [Accessed 13 May 2020]

	Examples of good practice	Areas for focus
Interacting with staff & partnering with staff	“The academic staff really give the chance to make lectures more discussion based and no question seems stupid which is nice”	“In the first year, some of these opportunities haven’t really been applicable yet”
	“During this term we have quite a few lecturers who make the lectures far more engaging through asking lots of questions which I like”	“I think it would be very beneficial to have some sort of careers advisor or an allocated time to speak with a member of staff about career/future plans”
	“My personal teacher has been an excellent support during my studies”	“I feel quite isolated from staff once a lesson or session is over”
	“I am a student rep for my course so I engage in staff–student meetings to discuss necessary changes that need to be made to the course”	“I don't feel we have that many opportunities for work with academics outside of lectures, which could be good for seeing how different fields of our degree actually work”
	“I will say that one of the best parts of my degree program is that our lecturers are available to us. I've heard other departments don't have the interaction we do inside and outside of regular class times - and that has been a fantastic part of my experience here”	“As lecturers have been replaced with associates, staff–student partnerships are not possible due to a greater work load placed upon the staff”

3.2 Levels of engagement before and during lockdown

As we discussed in the introductory section, our fieldwork period spanned the point when much of university teaching was moved online and the university experience changed significantly. This robust data collected enables us to compare how students responded if completing the survey before, or after, significant changes were introduced. We have referred here, and throughout the rest of this report, to “before lockdown” and “during lockdown”, using our date of 16 March as the cut-off date.

Engagement across categories – lockdown comparison



The first point to make about these data is that students surveyed since “lockdown” report higher levels of engagement in four out of seven areas. Most notably, there is higher engagement in partnering and interacting with staff, two of the areas where engagement usually tends to be lower than we might hope. It is important to note that the questions in UKES ask about the academic year as a whole and are not focused on the particular week when the survey took place. However, the data do imply that during lockdown some positive initiatives were introduced to help students connect with staff.

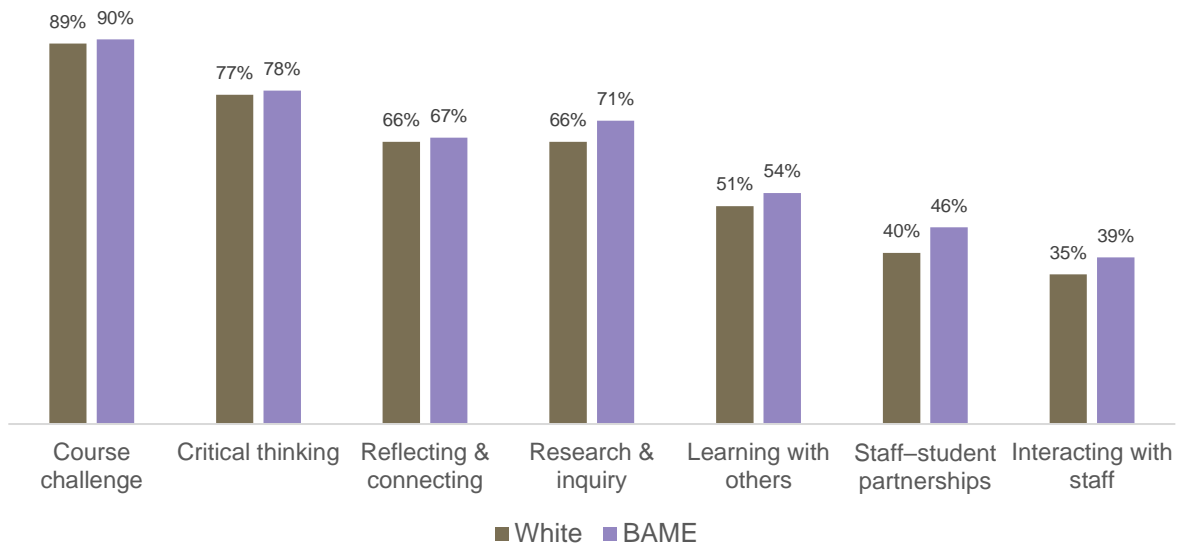
In terms of other aspects of engagement, it is logical that levels of research and inquiry have increased, as this is likely to reflect how learning has taken place since lockdown, and it is perhaps understandable that levels of learning with other students has declined, given the nature of the circumstances prevailing at the time.

3.3 Engagement, ethnicity and period of learning

We have seen in previous years’ reports how student engagement tends to go against what we often see in terms of the levels of satisfaction and outcomes of (UK domiciled) BAME students. Specifically, whereas satisfaction among BAME students is often lower than among (UK domiciled) White students,⁶ the reverse is true for engagement levels.

⁶ Neves, J and Hewitt, R (2020). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI, p 28.

Overall engagement by ethnicity – UK domicile



This is reinforced by the 2020 findings, which point clearly to students from BAME backgrounds putting in a significant amount of time and effort into their learning. It is fair to say that there is not currently a wide body of evidence across the sector which addresses or explains why BAME students often report a less positive experience in terms of satisfaction or outcomes. However, what we can infer from this data is that these high levels of engagement provide clear evidence of significant levels of effort and motivation among BAME students.

3.4 Combining these factors

Our analysis so far has highlighted three key points:

1. Engagement in many categories was greater among students surveyed during lockdown
2. Students from BAME backgrounds display greater levels of engagement overall
3. The sample of students surveyed during lockdown contains a higher proportion from BAME backgrounds.

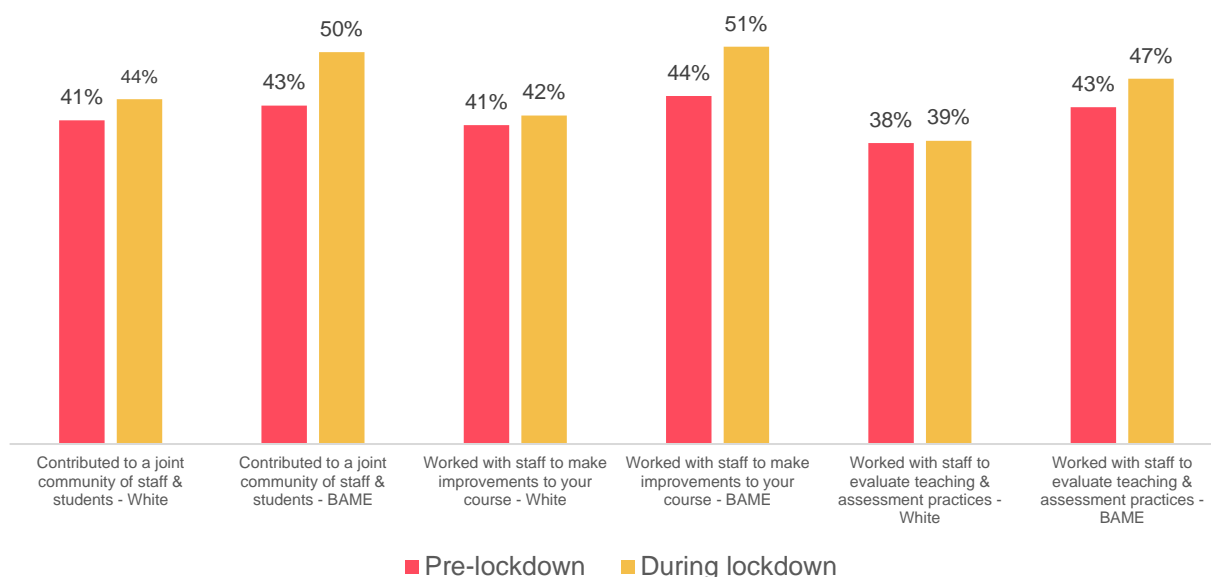
It is therefore important to consider how these issues interact. For example, could it be that the greater levels of engagement during lockdown (point 1) are related to the sample differences (point 3) rather than a genuine story of greater engagement on a like-for-like level? In any set of data like this we cannot prove cause and effect but we can conduct due diligence in our analysis to identify where these factors exist.

3.5 Partnering with staff

One of the main aspects where engagement increased during lockdown was partnering with staff – which is significant as it had been identified in previous years as a key area with links to skills development but where engagement was usually lower than we would hope for.

In order to try to tease out the relative impact of sample differences between the fieldwork periods, we have conducted specific analysis by ethnicity,⁷ filtered by each of our two main time periods. To provide maximum detail we have done this using all three individual questions within the “Partnering with staff” category.

Partnering with staff – engagement by ethnicity combined with time period



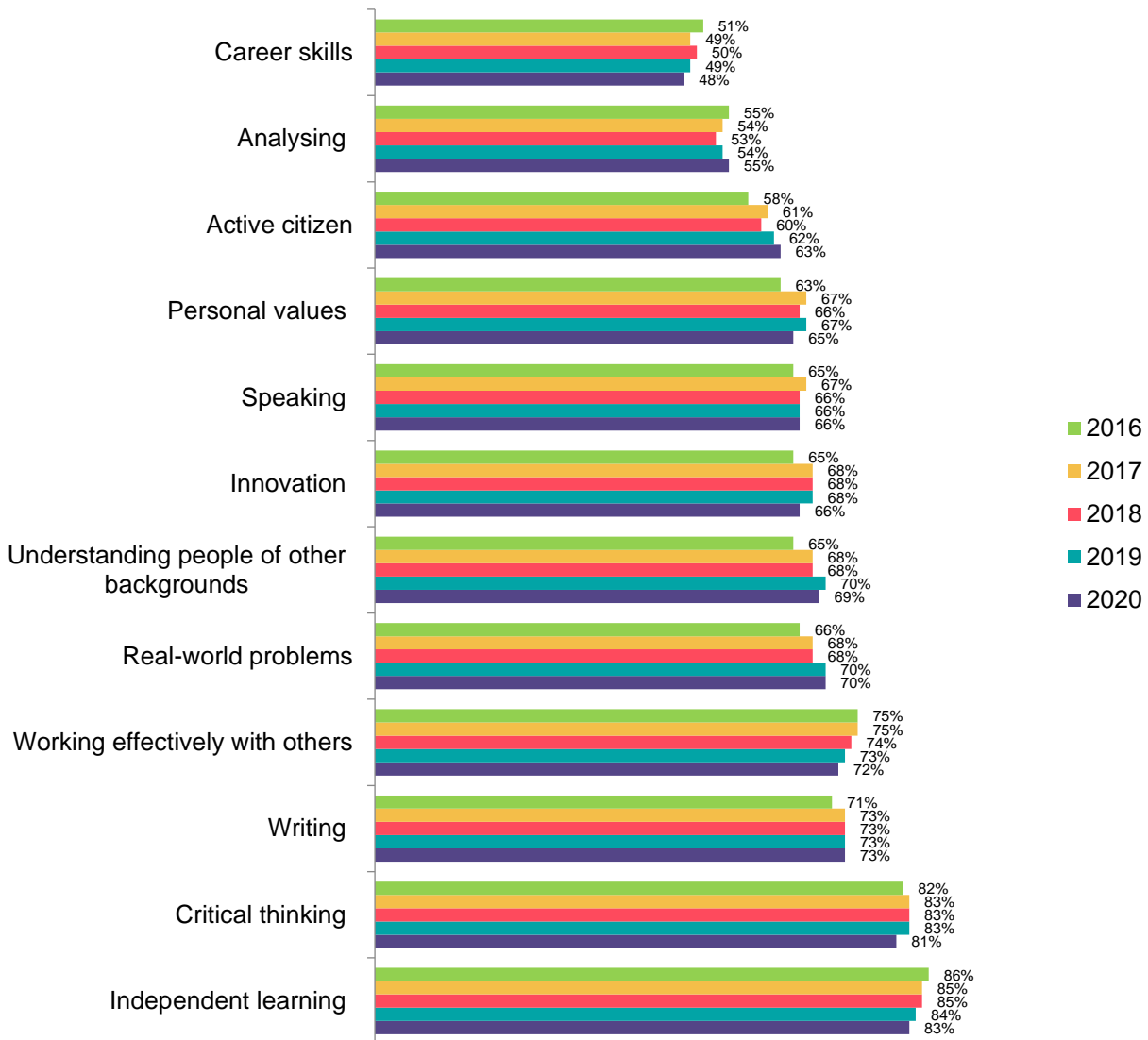
This detailed analysis highlights that for both White and BAME students, across the statements in this section, levels of engagement with staff were greater in the period when most teaching was moved online. The difference between time periods is more pronounced among BAME students, but the data suggests that we can make a reasonable conclusion that the greater levels of engagement post-16 March were reflective of genuinely higher levels of interaction. This is a positive finding which is an endorsement of how teaching staff supported and encouraged students to learn, through their availability and feedback.

⁷ As this analysis is principally done in order to compare time periods, we have included respondents of all domiciles for a more comprehensive coverage.

4 Skills development

4.1 Overall

Skills development year on year



Items ranked in ascending order of skills development.

The two most developed skills are those which are arguably most associated with academic learning – Independent learning and Critical thinking. Other core skills, namely Writing and Working with others (Collaboration), are also well developed.

Among the areas that are consistently less well developed are the skills that are related to wider competencies that feed into more rounded development such as Solving real-world problems, Understanding others and Developing personal values.

All of the skills measured in UKES contribute to students' wider development which in turn will help prepare them for employment. However, UKES also includes a specific item on career skills which focuses specifically on job-seeking skills such as CV and interview preparation.

Unfortunately, only around half of students recognised that these career-specific skills had developed during their time at university, which is a concern. Against this, however, we should recognise that a high proportion of UKES participants take part in the earlier stages of their undergraduate journey and hence these career-specific skills may be less prominent.

Although there have been year-on-year movements, the relative order of the skills developed has not changed, with many of the levels of development in 2020 being very similar to those reported back in 2016. This provides clear evidence that there has been little material change across the sector in how undergraduates believe they have developed their skills.

The comments below are included to provide a flavour of how students consider they have effectively developed skills and what some of the barriers have been.

Selected open comments		
	Examples of good practice	Areas for focus
Skills development	“I really enjoyed all of my courses, in spite of the unprecedented times and challenges we are now facing. My teachers were extremely supportive and have continuously encouraged me to challenge myself and expand my horizons”	“Apart from writing reports for assignments, very little effort is made to broaden our skill set for the real world”
	“My classes have really encouraged collaborating with others and thinking about how certain topics relate to current events”	“Lecturers seem to tell you what you need to do or what to do to improve but not how to do that”
	“Since I have started this academic year I have noticed significant change in my personal approaches in life outside of university. This year I have become an independent worker as well as communicating with others not only on my course level but within the wider community.”	“Sometimes I would like to have more of a relationship with some of the lecturers, where possibly they share some of their recent work, and allow students to optionally participate and share ideas if they choose
	“My course has given opportunities for all of the above and we have been encouraged in all of these areas”	“There isn't a great deal of focus on future career prospects. I think this is something that could be improved upon – like having previous students come in to talk about what they have done or workshops for people who have some idea of what field they would like to go into”
	“With many cultures and religions at the uni it has helped me to develop my knowledge and break down barriers”	“Sometimes feel like I am being supplied with a lot of information but unsure how it is actually helping me for the future”

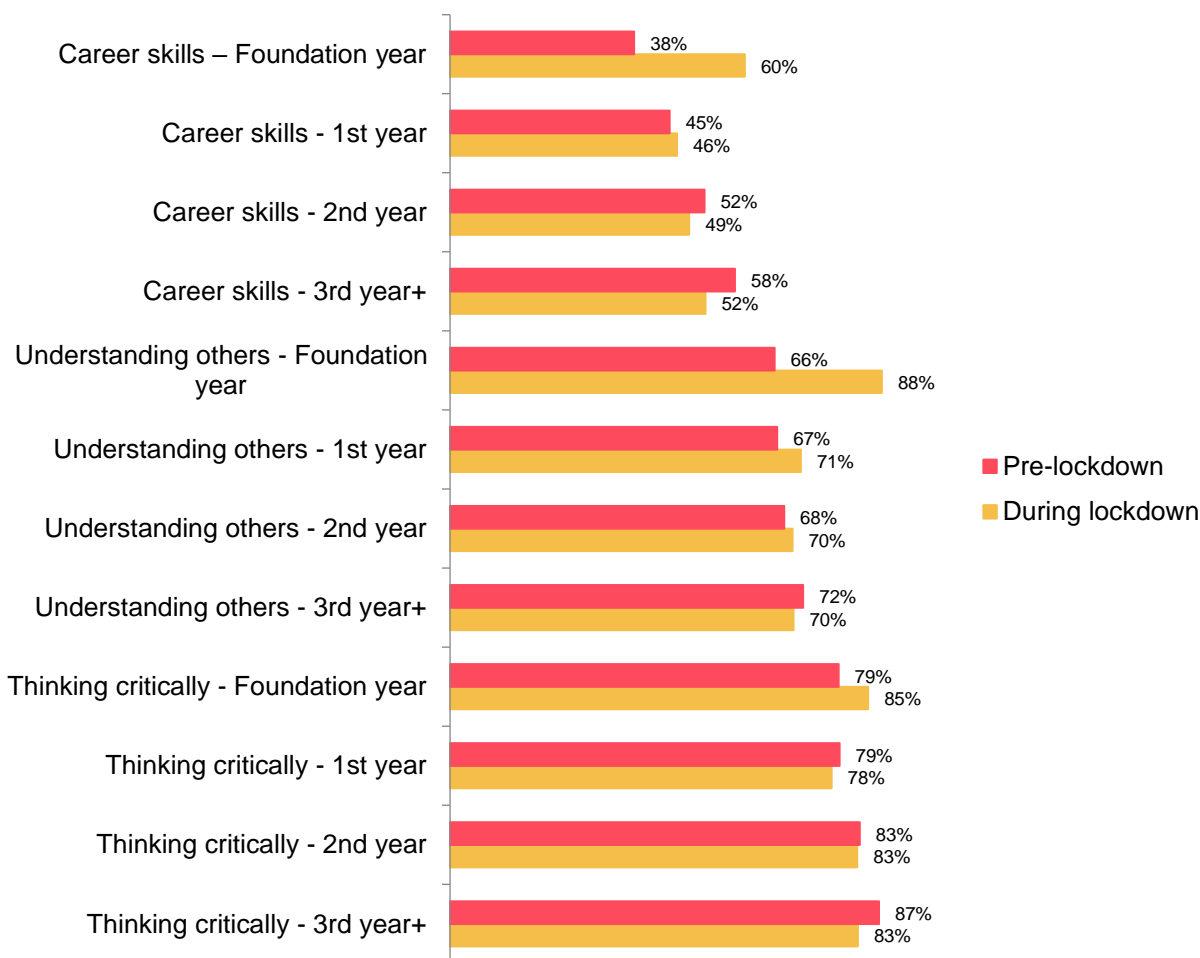
4.2 Skills development by time period and year of study

We know from previous years' analysis that skills development is often highest in the foundation year and in the final year. We also know from our sample analysis in section 2.2 that there were higher numbers of foundation year and final year students in our sample during the time period from 16 March onwards. Accordingly, it follows that we may expect to see greater levels of skills development across students who took part in the survey from 16 March onwards, but that this could in theory be sample related rather than related to any change in how students were engaging during lockdown.

We have therefore conducted analysis which combines all these aspects to understand how levels of skills development vary by year of study across the different time periods, in order to help identify whether the data points to any material impact that lockdown may have played.

The analysis below focuses specifically on four skills items, for reasons of space, but these items have been selected to represent a cross-section of skills covered.

Skills development by time period and year of study



This analysis uncovers notable differences between foundation year and third year+ students and how their skills development levels changed if they were surveyed before or during lockdown.

For foundation year students, across most skills areas in addition to those highlighted here, skills development was much higher among those surveyed during lockdown. By contrast among students in their third year or higher (ie often in their final year), reported levels of skills were higher among those surveyed before lockdown. Among first and second years there is a mix of smaller changes – increases for Understanding Others and a decrease for Career Skills.

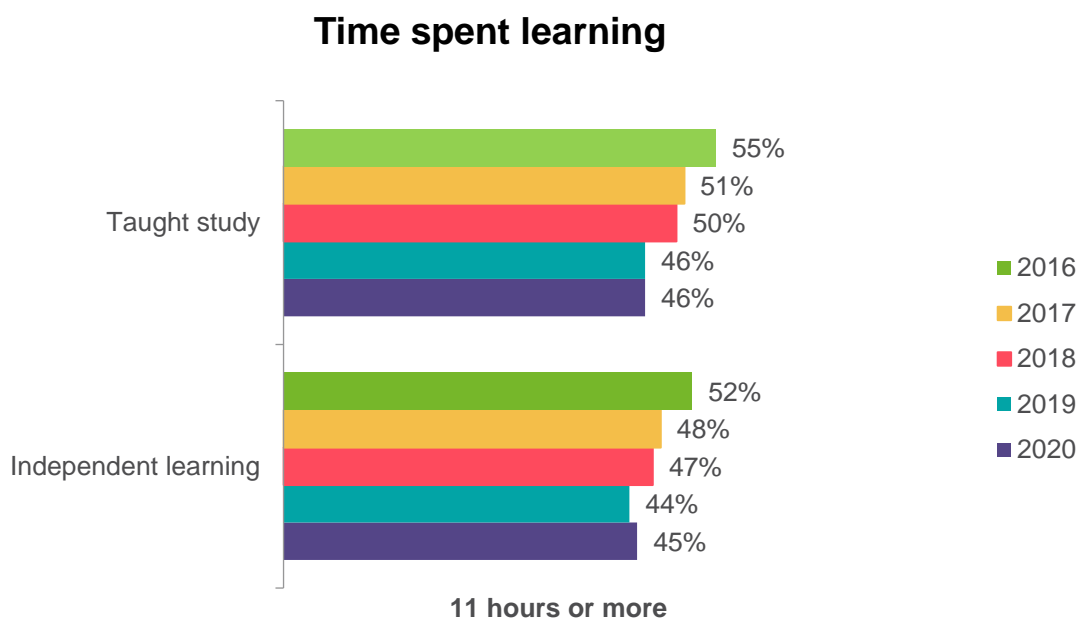
In terms of identifying any “impact” of lockdown, this data is relatively inconclusive. Foundation students report strong skills gain but this may be due to having had more time to develop their skills at such an early stage. The lower skills reported by those in their third year or higher is potentially concerning, but given that first and second years do not report such a consistent decline then it would be purely speculation to suggest that this is an impact of the student experience under lockdown.

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.

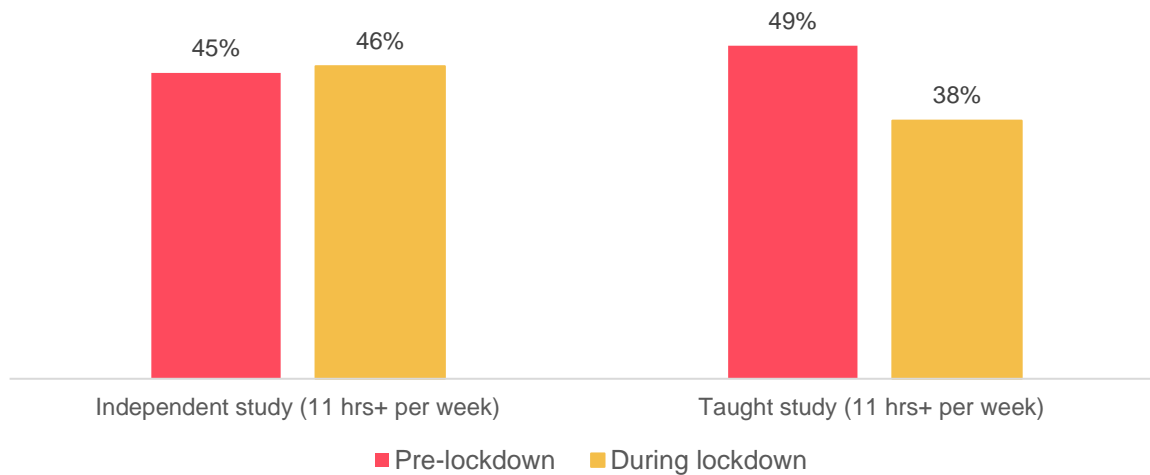
Among students at UKES-participating institutions, time spent learning was considerably lower in 2020 than it was in 2016, both for taught and independent learning, although figures have begun to stabilise in the past year.



This is one particular aspect where the organisation of teaching online during lockdown may conceivably have had an impact – so we now go on to assess what the data tells us on this point.

As we have pointed out before, the UKES questions are designed to reflect the experience as a whole across the semester or year rather than a specific point in time. However, it does appear that some students are perceiving the enforced move away from face-to-face teaching during lockdown as representing a reduction in taught teaching hours – and are perhaps not always quantifying online teaching and other interactions in the same way.

Time spent learning – lockdown comparison



Despite the differences in sample by time period referred to earlier in this report, the deeper data behind these results (not charted here) shows that the lower figures for taught study reflected feedback from students in most demographic groups, ie different year groups and ethnic groups, so we may reasonably conclude that this is reflective of a clear perceived difference in teaching hours after 16 March.

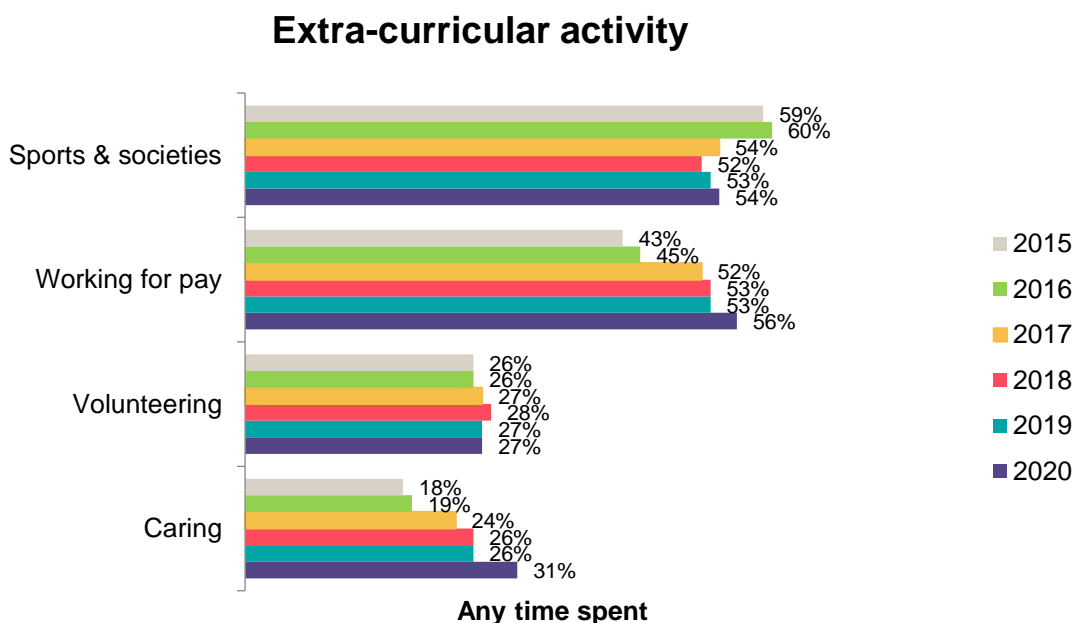
It is important to note however that this does not imply a reduction in the quality of the student experience during lockdown. For example, the 2020 Student Academic Experience Survey identified clear evidence of high-quality teaching practice being delivered to students who were predominantly interacting with their course online.⁸

⁸ Neves, J and Hewitt, R (2020). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI, p 40.

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.



In previous years we have seen the time spent in sports and societies decline, while conversely the time spent working for pay increase. Although understandable from an economic point of view, this ran contrary to some of the analysis from previous years of UKES which identified that sports and societies can contribute to wider skills development to a greater extent than working for pay.⁹ We have also seen over the years that both volunteering and caring are activities that can contribute significantly to a student’s wider development.

At an overall level, time spent in sports and societies has increased marginally this year, and time spent volunteering has stayed the same. By contrast there have been clear increases in working for pay and caring.

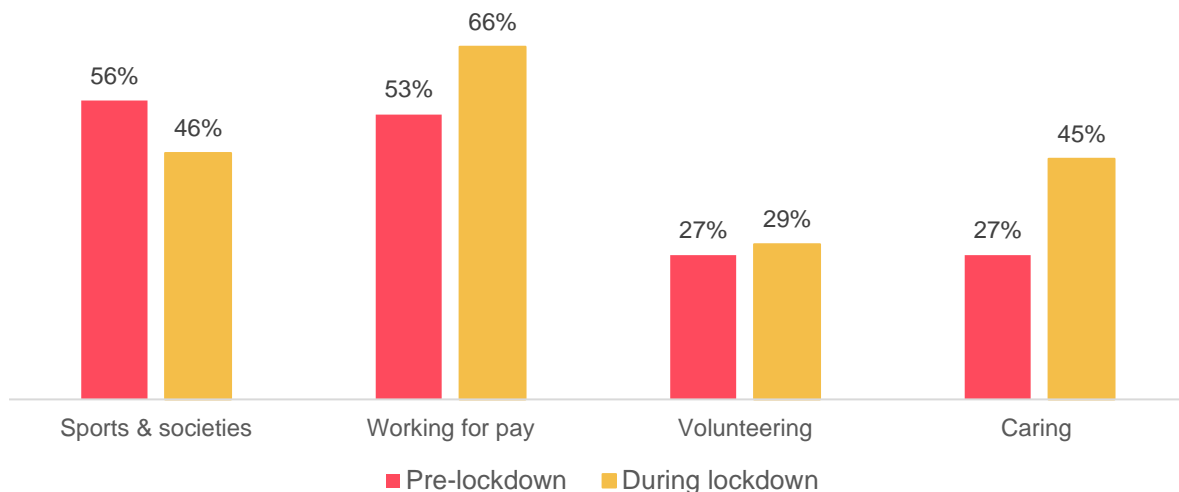
⁹ Neves, J (2019). UK Engagement Survey. Advance HE, p 25.

All these aspects might reasonably be expected to be impacted by the coronavirus pandemic, even though as we noted earlier, the questions in the survey ask about students' experiences across the year. As the chart below illustrates, there is in fact a clear contrast by time period. Students surveyed after 16 March were less likely to say they take part in sports/societies, but much more likely to work for pay.

Volunteering also increased to some extent, but the main standout difference was in terms of Caring responsibilities which have increased to a great extent, from 27% of those surveyed before 16th March, to 45% of those surveyed after this date.

As we saw for time spent studying (above), these differences by time period are consistent across year of study and ethnic categories so we can be reasonably confident that they are reflective of the impact on students' lives of the pandemic rather than being related to the differences in the sample profile.

Time spent on activities (any time spent) - lockdown comparison



These differences do make intuitive sense – reflecting less time spent with other students and in some cases, more time spent with close family. The significant increase in Caring responsibilities is particularly striking, providing evidence of how students have had to deal with a range of pressures and responsibilities in their lives beyond their studies.

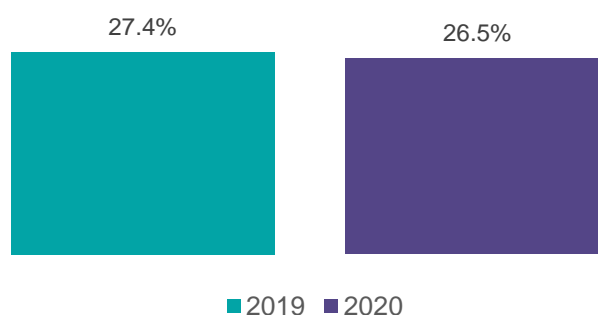
Across all categories of non-study activity, the comments below provide further detail of the responsibilities and pressures faced by students.

Selected open comments	
Time spent in non-study activities	“My timetable is quite hectic as I study on a full-time course and work part-time. I also have caring responsibilities for my children and parents. I travel to University by car which takes me 1 hour each way”
	“I definitely spend much more time at work than I do university”
	“I do not have chance to take part in extra curriculum activities as they are all on days when I am not in. As a commuter, I do not feel the university takes into consideration that we cannot come in on days with no lectures as it costs a lot of money and take a lot of time”
	“Need to spend more time studying. Am giving up paid work and will spend more time now assignments are out”
	“My course is very demanding and I don't find I have the time or routine due to placement to be able to join societies or sports”

7 Retention

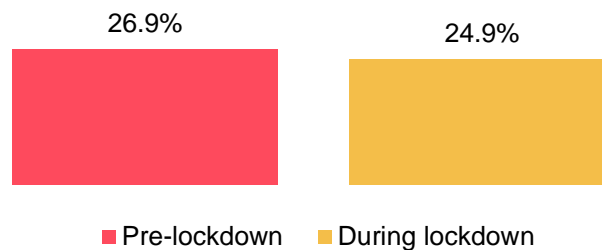
In 2019 we added a new question for UKES which asked students the extent to which they have considered leaving their course. Overall levels are relatively consistent, but in the light of the pandemic and the obvious challenges students have faced, it is encouraging to observe that the propensity to leave has actually decreased slightly compared to last year.

Considered leaving



We may have reasonably anticipated that the pressures and stresses of life under lockdown could have impacted negatively on students’ ability to continue with their course, but encouragingly this does not appear to be the case. Students responding during lockdown are in fact 2% less likely to have considered leaving their course, which is a positive endorsement of how they have been supported, as well as how they have adjusted and adapted to learning under lockdown.

Considered leaving – lockdown comparison



As we highlighted earlier, the lockdown sample of students had particularly high proportions of students in their foundation years, and final years, as well as students from a BAME background. The table below shows that while these particular groups were in fact the most likely to report better retention during lockdown, the other cohorts reported little difference between time periods – with no evidence of a contradictory trend.

Considered leaving		Pre-lockdown	During lockdown
Year of study	Foundation year	25.3%	10.6%
	First year	23.7%	23.5%
	Second year	30.3%	29.3%
	Third year+	30.4%	29.2%
Ethnicity	White	29.6%	29.8%
	BAME	24.2%	19.3%

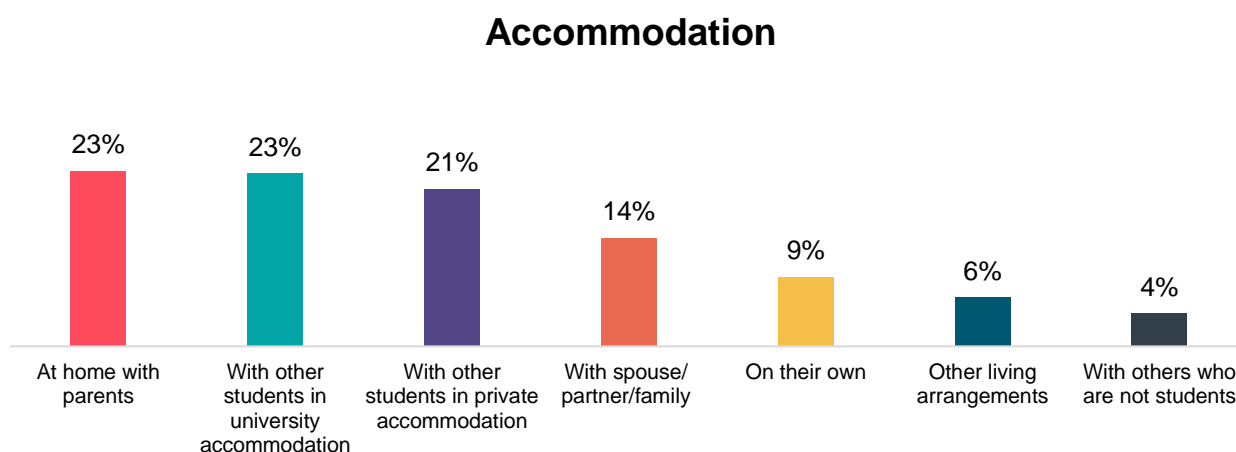
We may therefore make a reasonable conclusion that while the differences in sample may have impacted slightly on the extent to which the levels of retention have improved during lockdown, the overall finding is a genuine one. It is also notable to see the relatively strong retention levels among BAME students – which matches their high levels of engagement seen earlier.

8 Living arrangements

8.1 Type of accommodation

In 2020, a new question asking undergraduates about their living arrangements was included in UKES. This was in response to recent work published by the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) which identified how the living arrangements of students as well as the distance travelled can impact significantly on the overall experience.¹⁰

Interestingly, the most common specific living situation is with parents (22.9%), slightly ahead of living with other students in university accommodation (22.6%) and living with other students in private accommodation (20.6%). Given that UKES is an undergraduate survey, the fact that nearly 1 in 4 live with their parents is a reminder that there are large cohorts of undergraduates who, in terms of living arrangements, do not have what is often seen as the traditional university experience comprising living away from home with other students.

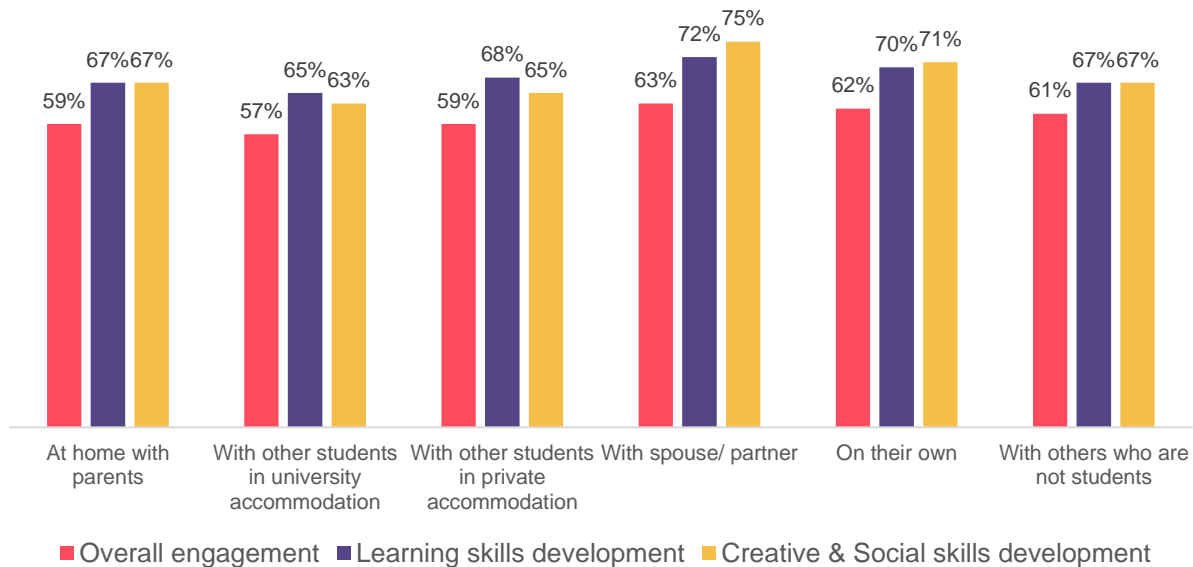


Capturing these data on living arrangements allows us to go further in our analysis by identifying the potential impact of these different situations on how students engage and develop their skills.¹¹

¹⁰ www.hepi.ac.uk/2018/12/13/homeward-bound-defining-understanding-aiding-commuter-students/

¹¹ In this analysis we have used the overall aggregate engagement data which is calculated as a summed average across the core engagement sections. Skills items have been grouped into two categories as described in section 2.2.1.

Accommodation, engagement and skills development



As illustrated above, levels of engagement and development of skills are generally fairly consistent across the different cohorts. Whereas the Student Academic Experience Survey has found consistently that students living with others in shared accommodation tend to have a more positive experience (in terms of value for money and other measures) than those living with parents or on their own,¹² this is not the case here for engagement.

By contrast, although the differences are not huge, levels of engagement and development are in fact at their lowest levels among students living in “traditional” university accommodation with other students – and students who live with their parents do not appear to be disadvantaged in this area.

Where there is a difference – a positive one – is among students who live with their spouse or partner as well as students who live on their own. Both of these cohorts display high levels of engagement and, in particular, strong levels of Creative and social skills – ie attributes related to wider-world situations. Whereas, as highlighted by the Student Academic Experience Survey, levels of satisfaction and perceived value for money are impacted by potential isolation from other students, there is evidence here that the quality of learning and development is not negatively impacted.

A potential explanation for this lies in the differences in the relative age of these cohorts. As the profile table below shows, students who live with others in university or private accommodation tend to be the youngest cohort, followed by students living in the parental

¹² Neves, J and Hillman, N (2019). Student Academic Experience Survey. Advance HE and HEPI, p 31.

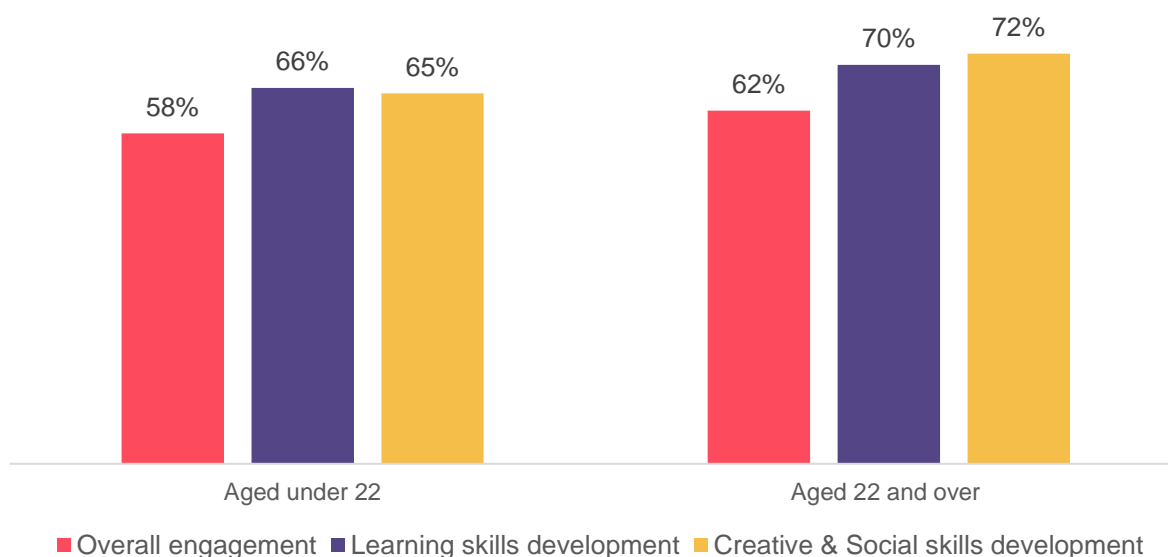
home. There is then a significant gap, with students living with spouse/partner, on their own or with non-students being much more likely to be older.

Age profile	Parental home	University accommodation	Private accommodation	Spouse/partner	On their own	Others
Aged under 22	78%	90%	86%	12%	22%	23%
Aged 22+	22%	10%	14%	88%	78%	78%

To complete our analysis, we now go on to assess how engagement and skills development varies by age – illustrated in the following chart. Unlike the analysis on living arrangements, we do see major differences by age – and these in turn help explain the differences we saw by type of accommodation.

Older students – defined here in the undergraduate context as those aged 22 and over – report higher (+4%) levels of engagement and learning skills development, and much higher (+7%) levels of Creative and social skills. This implies that older students often show high levels of motivation and may be particularly aware of how the way they spend time can help them develop. Given the nature of the Creative and social skills measured by UKES, and their link to wider citizenship, it is also feasible to surmise that older students may be in a better position to recognise these skills and relate them to their learning.

Age, engagement and skills development



To summarise the analysis in this chapter, there appears to be little negative impact of living arrangements on levels of engagement or skills development. Indeed, unlike other research on student satisfaction, it is students who live away from the traditional student accommodation who show the strongest results, with the data suggesting that a key factor behind this is related to age, rather than the living arrangements themselves.

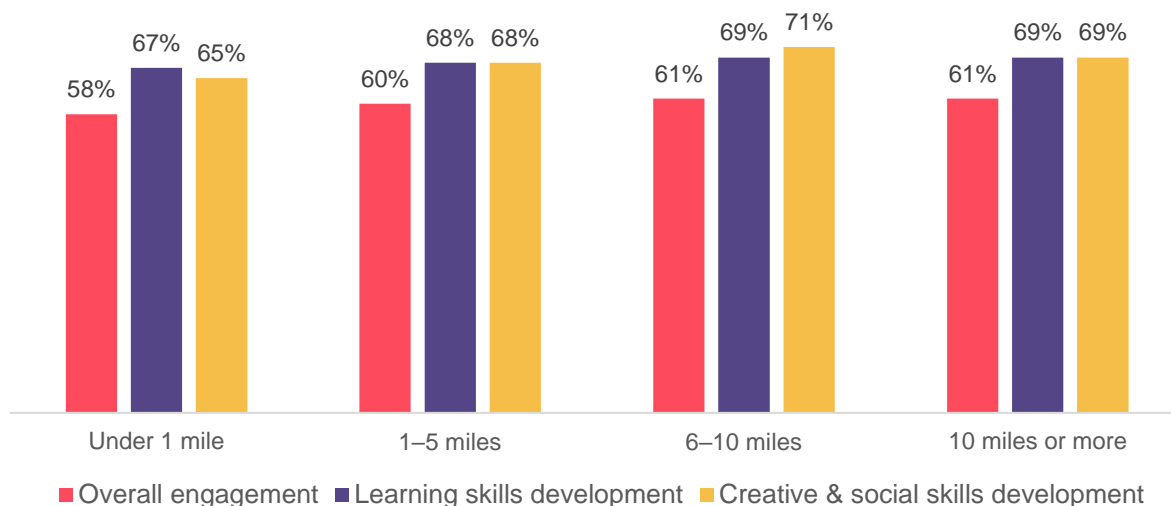
8.2 Distance travelled to campus

Another question new to UKES in 2020 addressed the distance undergraduate students travel to campus from where they live during term time. Notwithstanding any impact of lockdown, students were encouraged to base this answer over the wider academic year. What is notable is the extent to which travel distances vary, with a large cohort being based very close to campus, but also sizeable cohorts travelling moderate distances (1–5 miles) or relatively long distances (10 miles or more).



We have seen from the analysis of the Student Academic Experience Survey that distance travelled (particularly when combined with type of accommodation) can impact on how students view their time at university. By including this question in UKES we can conduct analysis to identify how this distance may have impacted their engagement.

Distance travelled, engagement and skills development



As we saw to some extent with the data on living arrangements, the distance travelled appears to have little impact on how a student engages. Indeed, the differences observed here are particularly small. Going against what student experience data might tell us, it is actually those students with the furthest distance to travel who engage the most and who recognise marginally stronger skills development.

One of the factors that may explain the slightly higher level of engagement is the students' age. There is a direct relationship between length of commute and age, and as we saw earlier, older students are more likely to engage in their learning.

Age profile	Under 1 mile	1-5 miles	6-10 miles	10 miles or more
Aged under 22	85%	61%	42%	41%
Aged 22+	15%	39%	58%	59%

We also have evidence from analysis from UKES 2018 on commuter students that the length of the commute is not a barrier to engagement, as many commuter students – who are often older – display significant levels of organisation and commitment to their studies, and to their own development.¹³

9 Considerations for the sector

4. The analysis of responses before and during lockdown provides clear evidence of positive experiences of partnering and interacting with staff virtually. Working directly with staff can be very developmental but is traditionally a low-scoring aspect. The positive results during lockdown point towards a range of good practice that could be harnessed and built upon to provide these key opportunities for students.
5. The proportion of students with caring responsibilities increased dramatically during lockdown, with nearly half of students spending some time each week caring for others. This has significant implications for how institutions can best support students to manage these responsibilities, while still accessing their learning and taking advantage of wider interactions with staff.
6. Living away from other students, and away from campus, can impact on the perceived quality of the undergraduate experience, but what the results in this report tell us is that this is less of a barrier to older students, who show very high levels of engagement. Consideration could be given to whether the experience of older students could be used to help and share ideas with younger students who may also face geographical barriers to getting the most out of their experience.
7. Consistently, some of the aspects of skills which develop the least are those which relate beyond academic knowledge to broader competencies for the wider world. This is highlighted in some of the open comments which highlight perceived gaps in terms of future preparation. Perception is key here, but it appears that there is more work to do across the sector to help students see how their course and wider interactions are developing a wide range of skills beyond their core academic knowledge.

¹³ Neves, J. (2018). UK Engagement Survey. Advance HE. p. 23

10 Appendix

10.1 Demographics

Category	Characteristic	UKES 2020 responses	UKES 2020 %
Gender	Women	9, 296	67%
	Men	4,168	30%
	Non-binary	101	1%
	In another way	52	0%
	Prefer not to say	245	2%
Age	21 and under	8,440	61%
	22 and over	5,433	39%
Fee status	UK	11,706	86%
	EU	1,338	10%
	Non-EU	520	4%
Ethnicity (UK domicile)	BAME	3,334	28%
	White	8,481	72%
Mode	Face to face	12,540	91%
	Distance learners	1,309	9%
Year	Foundation	1,092	8%
	1	6,094	44%
	2	5,199	38%
	3+	1,439	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.

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