

British Academy

AHSS Skills Research

June 2017

NUS Services in partnership with the British Academy

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Executive Summary

Executive Summary

This report contains the findings from a qualitative exploration into Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) student's perception of the skills they have and use, the value of those skills and the resources they might need to help them develop/recognise those skills in the future.

Defining skills:

- AHSS students largely define skills as being abilities, tools or assets that have a use or purpose
- They commonly cited essay writing, critical thinking and working to deadlines as skills gained from their course
- Having more 'confidence' was also frequently mentioned as gained from both their course and as a by-product of going to university
- Feeling that AHSS courses require good oral and written communication skills and the ability to think critically about information and sources
- This leads to a core skill set shared by most AHSS students around being open minded, self-reflective, thinking critically and communicating
- AHSS students deem these skills as valuable in helping them to make more informed decisions and in interactions with different groups people

Life skills:

- AHSS courses are thought to have helped students with soft skills e.g. being open minded, confident and not taking things at face value
- Improved communication skills as a result of team work and group presentations and practical skills such as time and task management have also helped in their daily lives
- Being able to think critically is a core skill that has helped them to become a better citizen with an increased desire to positively impact/give back, to educate others and create more meaningful work also being cited

Employability skills:

- There is general agreement that students take AHSS courses because of a love for, or enjoyment of, the subject they chose, rather than picking it with a specific career path in mind

- Most felt that their course leaves them open to many different career paths due to having transferable skills
- Most felt that they already have many of the skills they would need for their chosen career but believe they can always build on them
- Students believe employers are looking for good communicators, someone who is adaptable and a team player
- A strong CV/covering letter, demonstrating skills at interview stage and taking a proactive approach in societies or on their course were the main ways they would demonstrate skills to employers

Resources:

- AHSS students recognise that there are already a lot of resources to help them but just need to make more use of them
- A high proportion have not used career services. Of those who had, some found them helpful for basics like CV writing, whilst others felt they could be improved by being more tailored/personalised
- Sources of advice and guidance used included: doing own online research, employability modules, employability award schemes, mock interviews, 1-2-1 sessions, workshops and careers fairs
- Generally high awareness of the skills they have but would like more resources related to:
 - How to demonstrate or highlight their skills
 - Tailored or personalised information on career paths/finding specific jobs related to their skills/qualifications
 - Talks from graduates/alumni who did their course to see how their skills can be used in future roles and career routes available
 - Clarification within courses about what skills will be gained from each module and how they can be used
- Some expressed concern around having too much information as they don't want to be overwhelmed or for it to get lost amongst other material disseminated during their time at university

About the research

Aims and Objectives

This research was commissioned by the British Academy in order to understand more about students studying Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS), the skills they have gained from their course, the skills they perceive they have and use and what resources or support they would like for the future.

Methodology

This project was commissioned by the British Academy as a qualitative piece of research with a view to understanding more of the detail behind AHSS student's understanding of skills, what skills they think they have and the value of those skills.

NUS conducted four online focus groups lasting approximately 1 hour each, running in the week commencing Monday 5th June 2017. The groups were broken up by the student's current level of study e.g. Group 1 – Postgraduates, Group 2 – Final year undergraduates etc. A mixture of demographics within each group was then selected in order to give a more full and varied perspective.

A discussion guide designed by NUS in consultation with the British Academy was used to structure the conversation within the online groups and cover the core objectives of the research.

The focus groups were made up as follows:

Date	Level of study	Courses	Regions	Gender
Monday 5 th June 2017	Postgraduate	Communication, Media, Film and Cultural Studies Business, Management and Administrative Studies Linguistics History Education Dance, Drama and Performance English Language or Literature Other: System Dynamics	Greater London North Wales Yorkshire & The Humber South East North West East Midlands	5 x Male 5 x Female
Tuesday 6 th June 2017	Final year undergraduates	History Film and television Education Area Studies Law Business, Management and Administrative Studies Languages, Culture and Societies Music Linguistics	North West Greater London West Midlands Yorkshire & The Humber South East East of England	5 x Male 4 x Female 1 x Prefer not to say
Wednesday 7 th June 2017	2nd & 3rd (not in their final year) undergraduates	Philosophy Languages, Culture and Societies Politics and International Relations Communication, Media, Film and Cultural Studies History of Art, Architecture and Design Education Dance, Drama and Performance	South East Greater London Yorkshire & The Humber East Midlands North West	4 x Male 5 x Female
Thursday 8 th June 2017	1 st year undergraduates	Music Dance, Drama and Performance English Language or Literature Sociology Creative writing Creative arts & design Education English Language or Literature Politics and International Relations Anthropology	North West Wales South West West Midlands South East Greater London	5 x Male 5 x Female

Reading this report

This report has been broken down into sections based on the core objectives that structured the design and flow of the discussion guide used in the online groups. Within each section, key themes have been pulled out with relevant quotations to support findings included in quotation boxes. A summary of the main themes within the findings is also included.

Research Findings

Section 1:

Defining skills

Section 1: Defining skills

This section explores what AHSS students understand about 'skills', how they define them and which skills they believe they have.

1.1 What do we mean by skills and how do AHSS students define them?

AHSS students largely define skills as being abilities, tools or assets that have a use or purpose. Most commonly they see that use or purpose as helping you to achieve a goal or being able to do something. Across all groups, students felt that skills are most often developed through experiences and learning and are then honed or improved over time.

An array of different skill categories were mentioned amongst AHSS students, with hard skills being defined as more tangible, such as being able to write essays, and soft skills being less tangible such as social skills.

Defining skills: Figure 1

What are skills and how would you define them in general?

- Described as *abilities /tools /assets*

"The abilities and tools you have/develop rather than the things you know about your subject." (Postgrad, Male)

"The ability to be able to do something." (Final Year, Female)

- Skills must have a *use/purpose/ application*

"A skill is a positive trait that you have at your disposal that is likely to help you achieve goals." (1st Year, Male)

"I would define skills as an aspect of everyday life that is 'useful' or beneficial." (Final Year, Male)

- Gained through experiences, learning, practice and repetition

"Skills to me means the ability to do something well, usually as a result of a lot of practice and time." (1st Year, Male)

"Skills are abstract things you acquire through knowledge and practice, which you hone and improve over time." (2nd & 3rd Year, Female)

- Developed, improved and honed over time

"Skills could range from: employability, subject knowledge, critical thinking, writing skills, oral presentation skills for confidence etc." (Postgrad, Female)

"Hard skills – capabilities that are tangible such as the ability to write, draw, cook... Soft skills – less tangible, like how you communicate with others, time management, team work." (2nd & 3rd Year, Female)

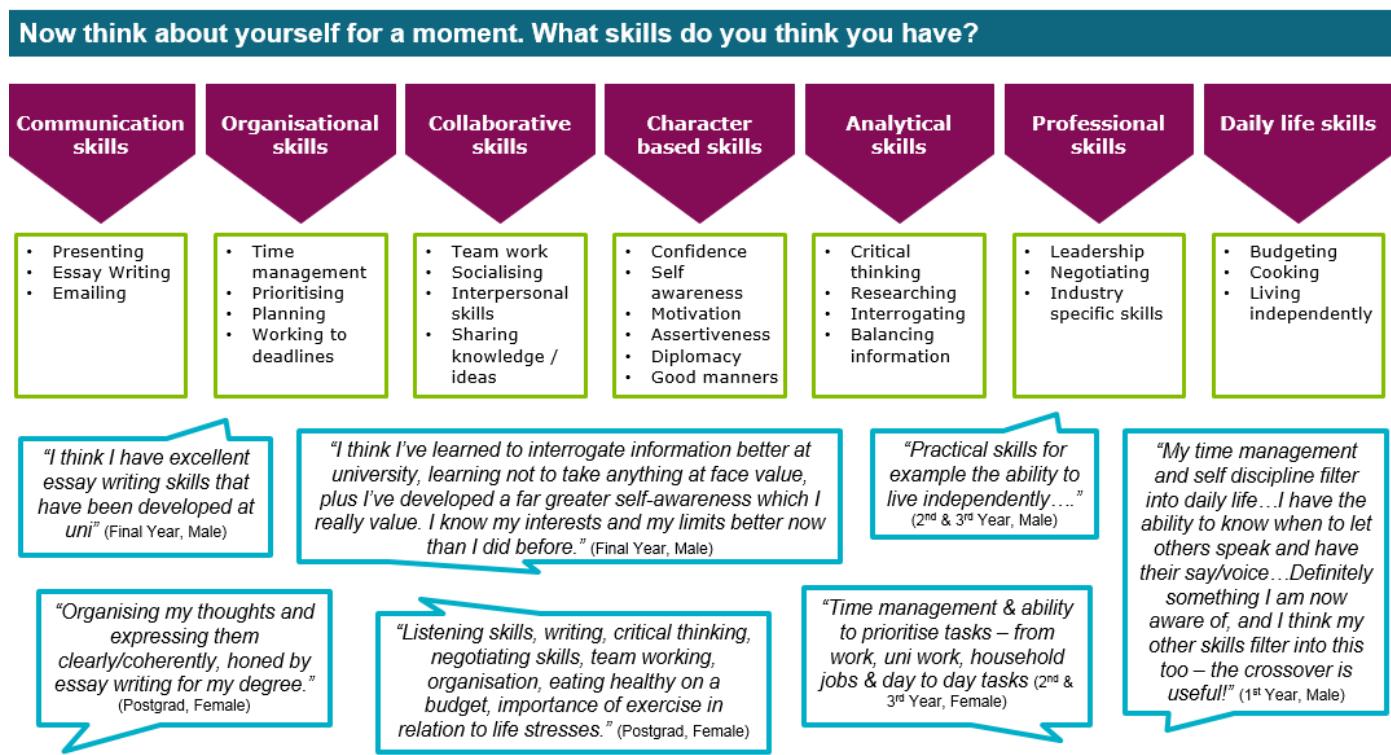
- Types of skills: Practical, hard, soft, creative, social, natural and developed

1.2 What skills do AHSS students believe they have?

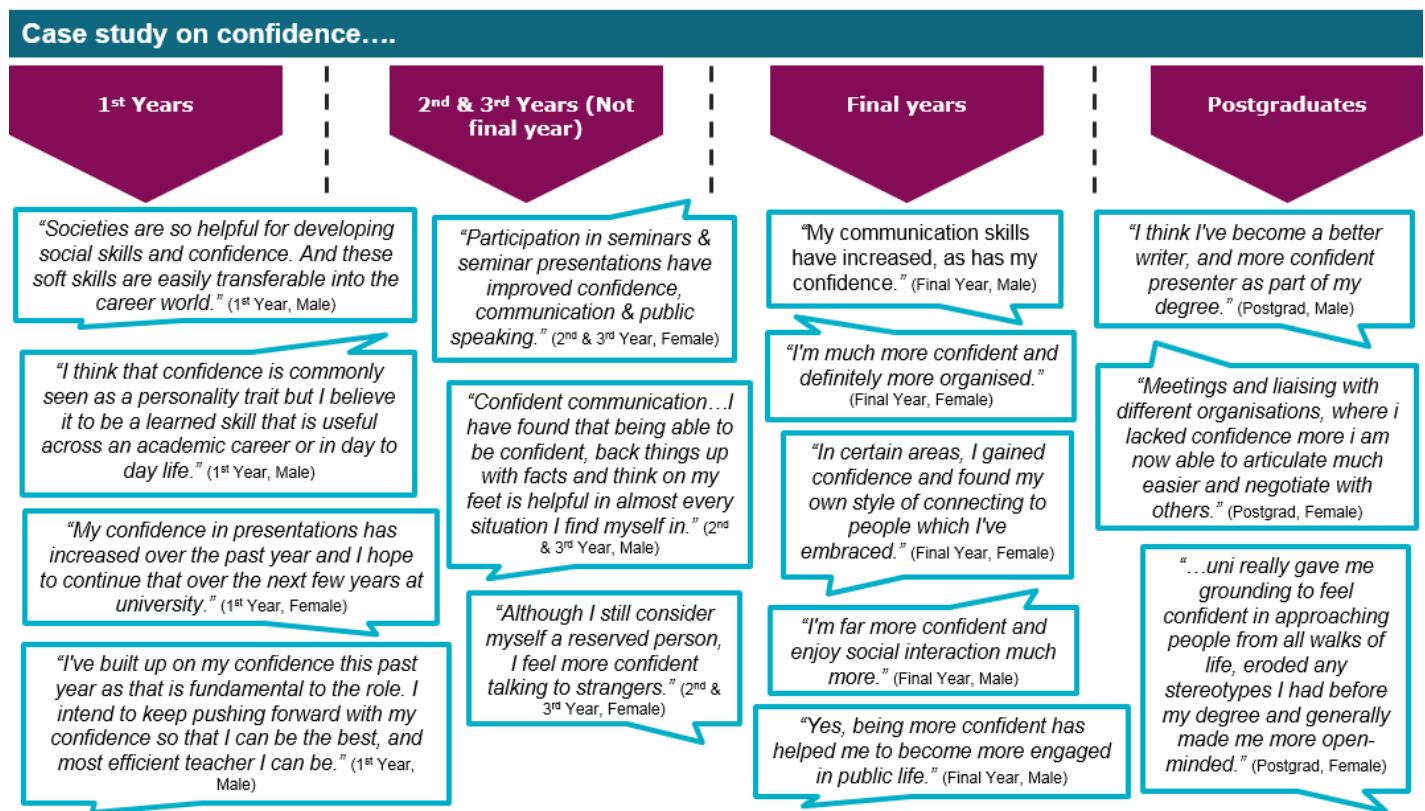
When asked which skills they think they've learnt through their degree course, as well as on a day to day basis, a number of different skills were mentioned by AHSS students. For the purposes of evaluation, we have grouped these into sub-categories as outlined in figure 2.

Of skills more specifically related to their degree course, essay writing, critical thinking and working to deadlines were key skills described, with many AHSS students believing that having the ability to evaluate the reliability and usefulness of information they have access to as highly valuable skills both on their course and in daily life.

Defining skills: Figure 2



Frequently cited across all groups was 'confidence', with AHSS students describing it both as an attribute e.g. being more confident in general, and a skill with an application e.g. becoming more confident to stand up and present in front of others. Interestingly, explanations of how confidence was gained did not necessarily pertain to it being a specific skill learned through their degree course, with many referring to it as more of a by-product of going to university in general.

Defining Skills: Figure 3

1.3 In what ways do they think their course/studying has helped them develop those skills?

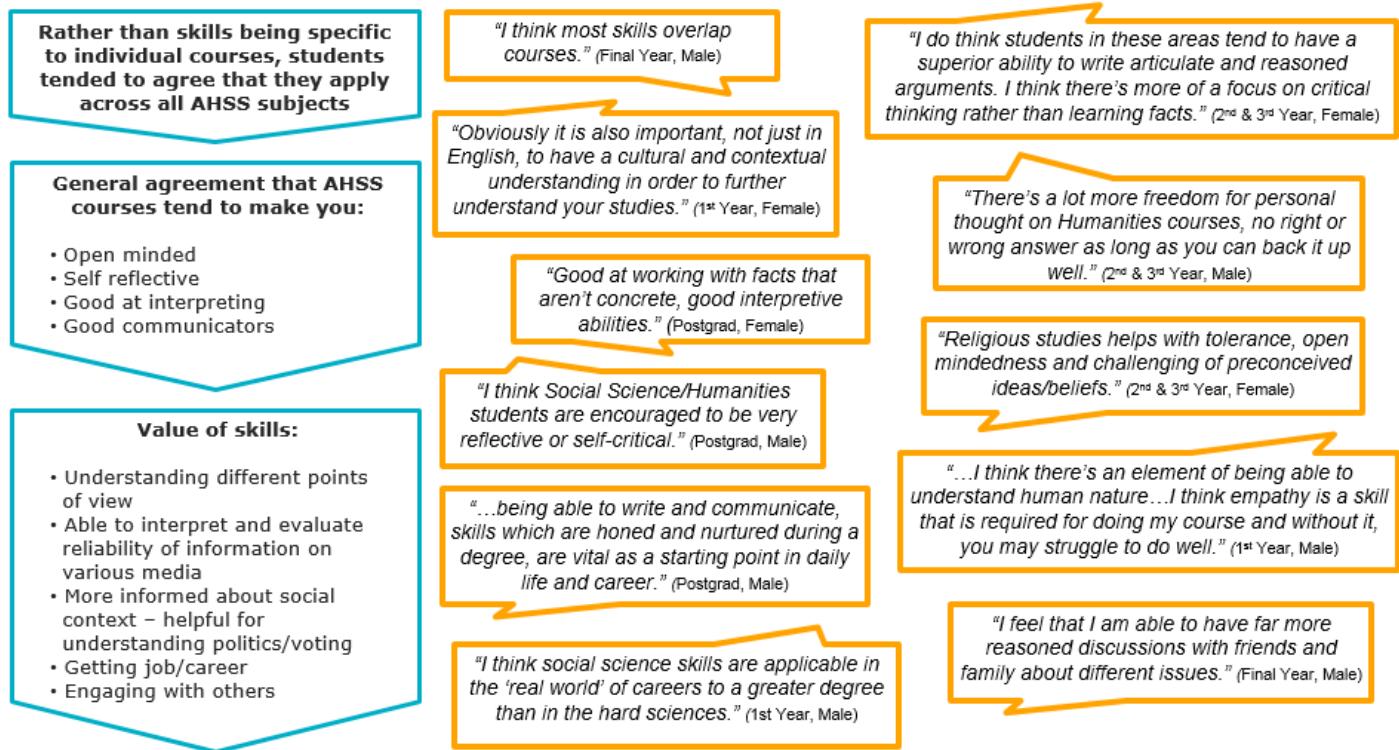
Across the groups, students generally agreed that the main skills gained through studying are applicable to students across all AHSS subjects rather than being specific to their individual course.

Students described the nature of AHSS courses as being more dependent on critical thinking and less based on absolute truths, when compared with other courses like maths and sciences. As a result, many felt that in order to succeed on their course they needed to be able to understand wider perspectives/influences, be good at interpreting the validity and reliability of information and be able to communicate their points using that information clearly. Students felt that these skills are developed mainly through the requirement of most AHSS courses to be good at both oral and written types of communication, working in groups to develop presentations or other ideas and the necessity of questioning sources of information. As such the core skill set that they believe most AHSS students gain from studying these types of subjects are around being open minded, self-reflective, good at interpreting, thinking critically and communicating.

When asked in what ways they felt the skills were valuable, interactions such as engaging with people from different cultures and backgrounds and being able to understand different points of view in discussions were commonly mentioned. Students also said that interpreting the reliability of information and being more informed about the social context/influences was helpful when viewing different things in the media/news and making decisions e.g. who to vote for.

Defining skills: Figure 4

And in what ways do you think your course/studying has helped you develop these skills, if it has at all?



Section 2:

Life skills

Section 2: Life skills

This section looks at the skills AHSS students use in their daily life and how they perceive their role in the community.

2.1 Which skills gained through their degree do they think help them in their day to day life (not including employment or studying)?

A mixture of soft and hard skills were noted as being helpful in the daily lives of AHSS students.

In the main, students felt the skills developed from their degree which helped them day to day were mainly soft skills, such as being open minded, confident and not taking things at face value again cited.

Students also frequently discussed communication skills, specifically referring to greater abilities in knowing how to talk to, and deal, with different people in a professional manner, often as a result of group exercises and team work on their courses.

More practical, hard skills such as time or task management and being more organised were also described as being helpful in daily life, particularly when it comes to budgeting their spend and setting reminders for deadlines. However these skills may once again be a by-product of going to university rather than specifically being directly gained from studying their course.

Life skills: Figure 5

Thinking about skills which you have gained or developed through your degree, which skills do you use in your day to day life?

Soft skills

- Confidence
- Open mindedness
- Tolerance
- Better decision making
- Listening
- Empathy
- Not taking things at face value

"Confidence, organisation, thinking for myself." (Final Year, Female)

"Communicative and interpersonal skills for sure. For example I've learned how to ask for things in the most concise way possible, at home and abroad. Dealing with people at work in the most appropriate manner. Also political debates, being more understanding and accepting rather than confrontational." (2nd & 3rd Year, Male)

"...sorting out 'crap' from 'gold' on any sort of media outlet: telly, net etc." (Postgrad, Female)

Hard skills

- Time management
- Communication
- Task management
- Organisation

"Being able to budget my spending, confidence, organisational skills." (Final Year, Male)

"Being organised as well. Setting reminders for oneself for deadlines, as well as important daily things to do." (Postgrad, Male)

"Meetings and liaising with different organisation, where I lacked confidence more I am now able to articulate much easier and negotiate with others." (Postgrad, Female)

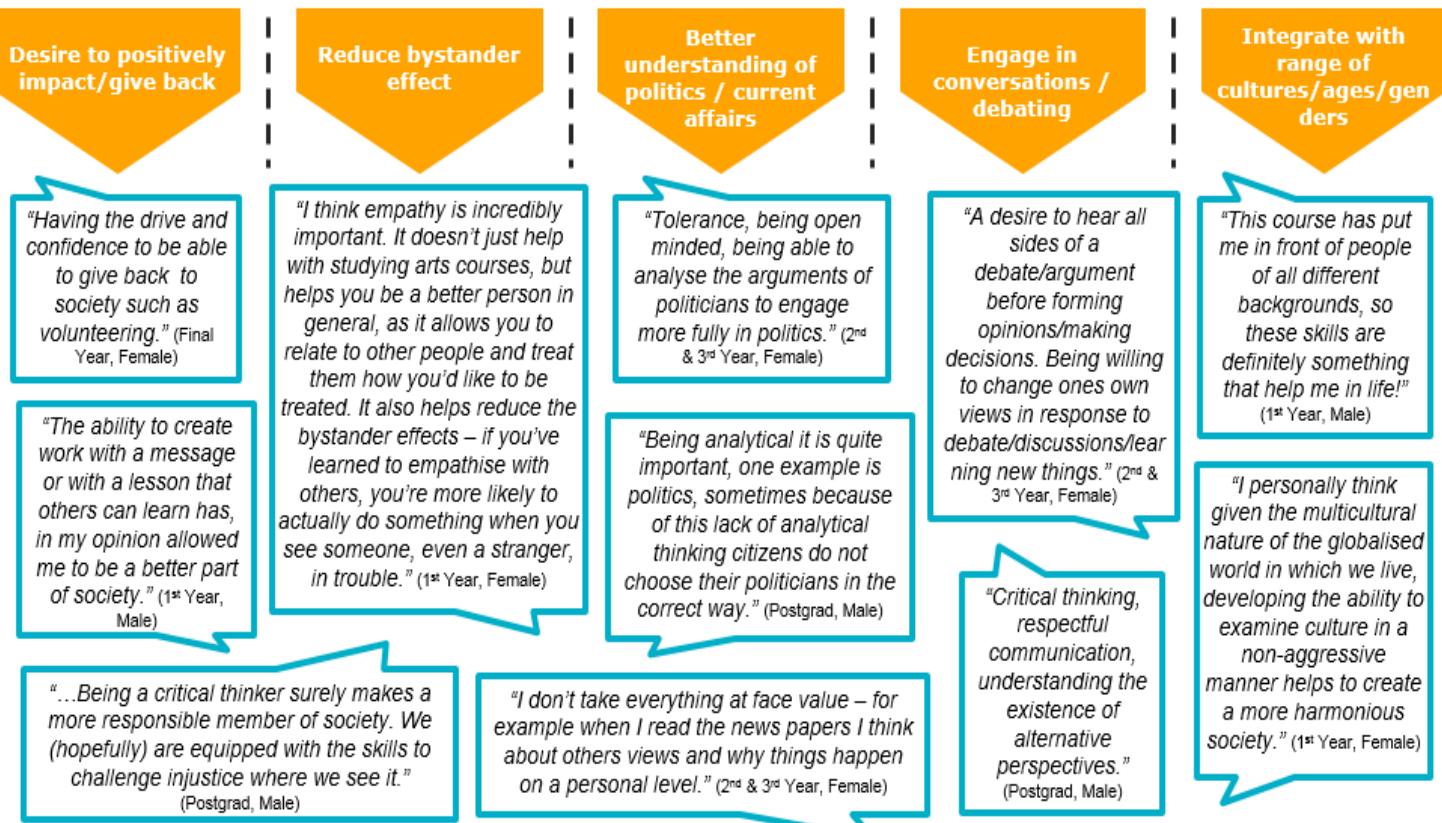
2.2 Do they think any of the skills help them to be a better citizen?

Overall, most students felt that being able to think critically is a core skill that has helped them to become a better citizen. In particular, some felt thinking critically leads them to making more informed decisions about politics/current affairs, being more tolerant, empathetic and understanding of different perspectives and cultures, especially when interacting/debating with others and more confident to challenge injustices where they see them.

Having an increased desire to positively impact/give back, to educate others and create more meaningful work were also ways students felt they have become better citizens and more engaged with society, as they can see the direct benefits of their skills.

Life skills: Figure 6

Are there any skills which you think help you be a better citizen or part of society?



Section 3:

Employability skills

Section 3: Employability skills

This section explores the skills which students believe are needed for their career, whether they have them and how they will demonstrate them.

3.1 Which jobs/ career paths do AHSS students have in mind and do they feel that studying AHSS courses leads them towards specific careers?

Despite the groups being split by year of study, students in all groups, ranging from first years to postgraduates, had some ideas about the career paths they wanted. Commonly mentioned were careers in teaching, working in the civil service and working in translation.

Whilst students did acknowledge that certain courses can push you towards a specific career route, e.g. studying law pushes you towards becoming a solicitor and studying SENI courses will lead you to teaching, the main sentiment shared was that people who study AHSS courses predominantly do so because of a love for, or enjoyment of, the subject they chose, rather than picking it with a specific career path in mind.

Some students also felt that there exists stereotypes or assumptions about students who study AHSS courses, e.g. if you study English or History you'll only want to become a teacher and if you don't do that you will become unemployed. However, even with some students wanting to go into teaching, most felt that their course leaves them open to lots of options and many different career paths due to it giving them transferable or adaptable skills.

Employability skills: Figure 7

Have any of you already thought about the job you want and the field you want to work in? | Do you think your course/subject gears you towards a specific career path?

- General agreement that tend to study AHSS courses for love/enjoyment of the subject

"I think studying these kind of subjects are not so much about vocation, the subjects are chosen out of love interest and enjoyment." (Postgrad, Female)

"Most students I have met on my course study Politics out of passion as opposed to career prospects." (2nd & 3rd Year, Female)

- Assumptions/ stereotypes/ expectations about career paths from AHSS exist e.g. if you study English/history you'll only want to be a teacher

"There's definitely a belief that studying English Lit can prepare you for a lot of different jobs, equally, there's the joke that if you study English you'll be an English teacher, and if not, you'll be unemployed." (Postgrad, Female)

"I actually chose my degree with no intended career path." (Postgrad, Female)

- Some courses like languages/translation or law do have a more set career path

"I think history opens many different paths." (Final Year, Male)

"I think a lot of people expect History students to become teachers, but not all of us want that!" (Postgrad, Male)

- Across all courses, most see themselves as having transferable skills and numerous career paths available to them

"I think my course leaves many different career paths open and the skills you gain can be applied to almost any role, which is one of the reasons I decided to study it." (2nd & 3rd Year, Male)

"Law definitely steers towards the solicitor/barrister route." (Final Year, Female)

"Unlike other courses, my course doesn't really lead one to a specific career field." (2nd & 3rd Year, Female)

3.2 What skills do AHSS students think employers want and how will they demonstrate those skills to future employers?

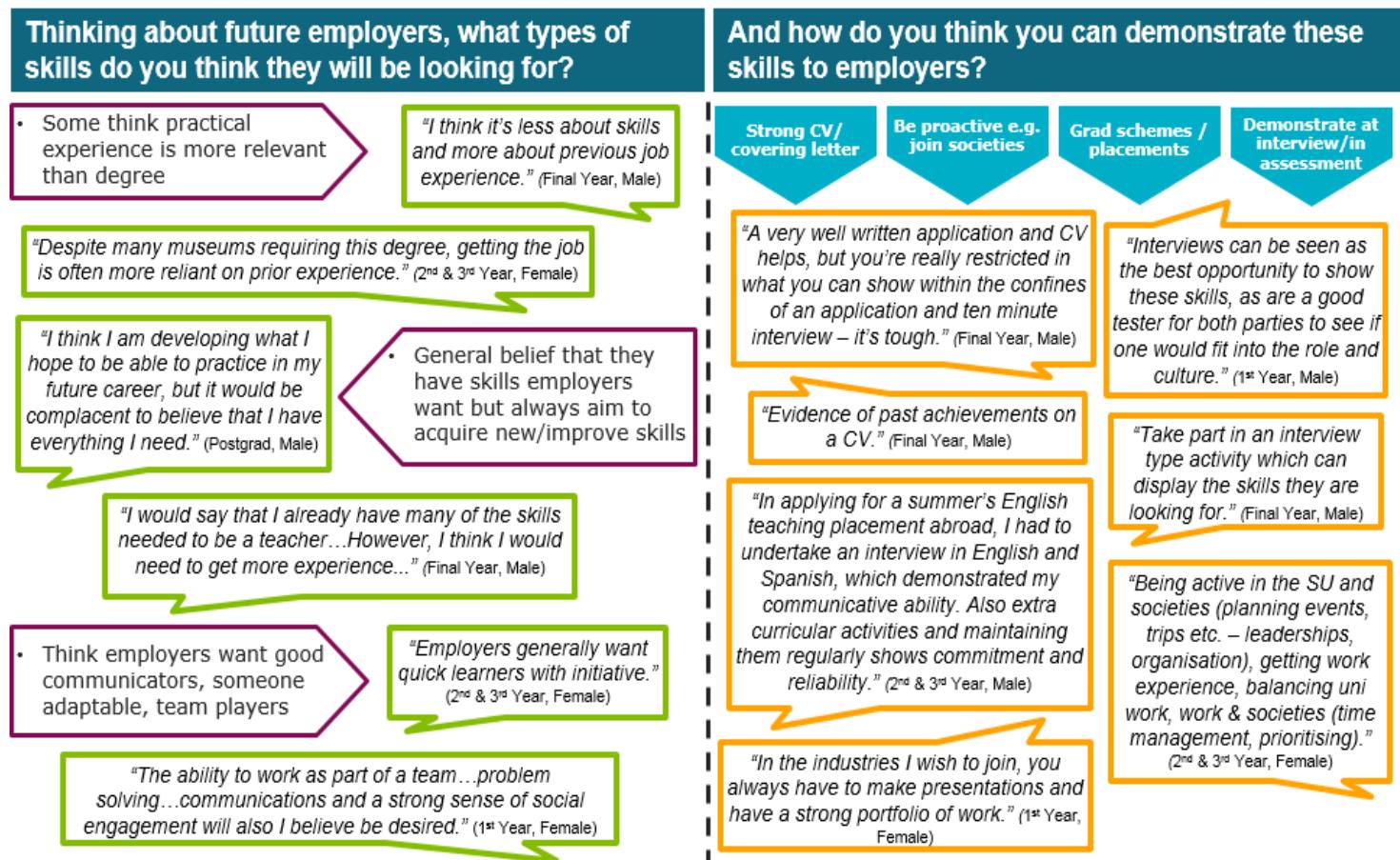
Some AHSS students believe that employers value previous work experience of equal or greater importance than their degree. However, this is not a concern for all, with some feeling that having a degree shows potential employers that you will have skills and can be dedicated to projects.

Across all groups, most students felt that they do already have many of the skills they would need for their chosen career but believe they can always build on them, either by improving those skills or acquiring new ones. Of the skills they believe employers are looking for, the most commonly cited were people who are good communicators, someone who is adaptable and team players.

A number of different methods for demonstrating their skills were given by AHSS students. Having a strong CV and covering letter that demonstrates their achievements and how they can lend their skills to the role is key but many felt that these were too limiting and that showing skills such as good communication at the interview stage, or through a practical assessment at

interview, would be the best way. Others felt that being proactive on your course and in societies, or taking part in grad schemes to further improve or acquire new skills would also demonstrate your skills to employers, whilst some felt that showing skills through on the job experience would be better.

Employability skills: Figure 8



Section 4:

Resources

Section 4: Resources

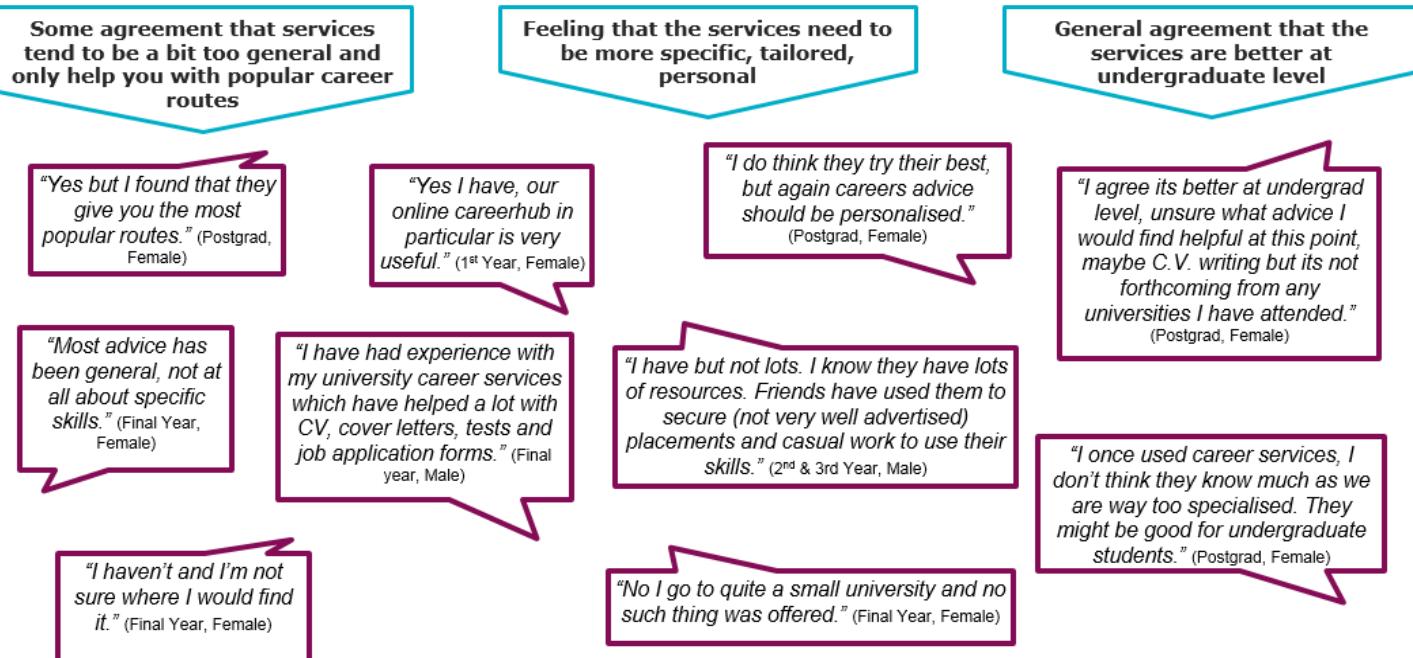
This section will explore the resources AHSS students have used to help them with recognising and developing their skills, as well as the resources they would like to have.

4.1 What experience with their university/Students' Union careers services have they had and how did they find it?

Across all the groups, many students said they had not used the careers service at their university/SU, with some citing it being too early as they are not in their final year, some not knowing where to go/who to ask and others believing there to be no such service at their university.

Of those who had, there were mixed reviews with some finding it to be really helpful for supporting them on the basics like CV writing, applications and interview skills and others finding them to be a bit too generalist, misadvising them on qualifications needed for certain jobs and only pushing students towards the popular career routes.

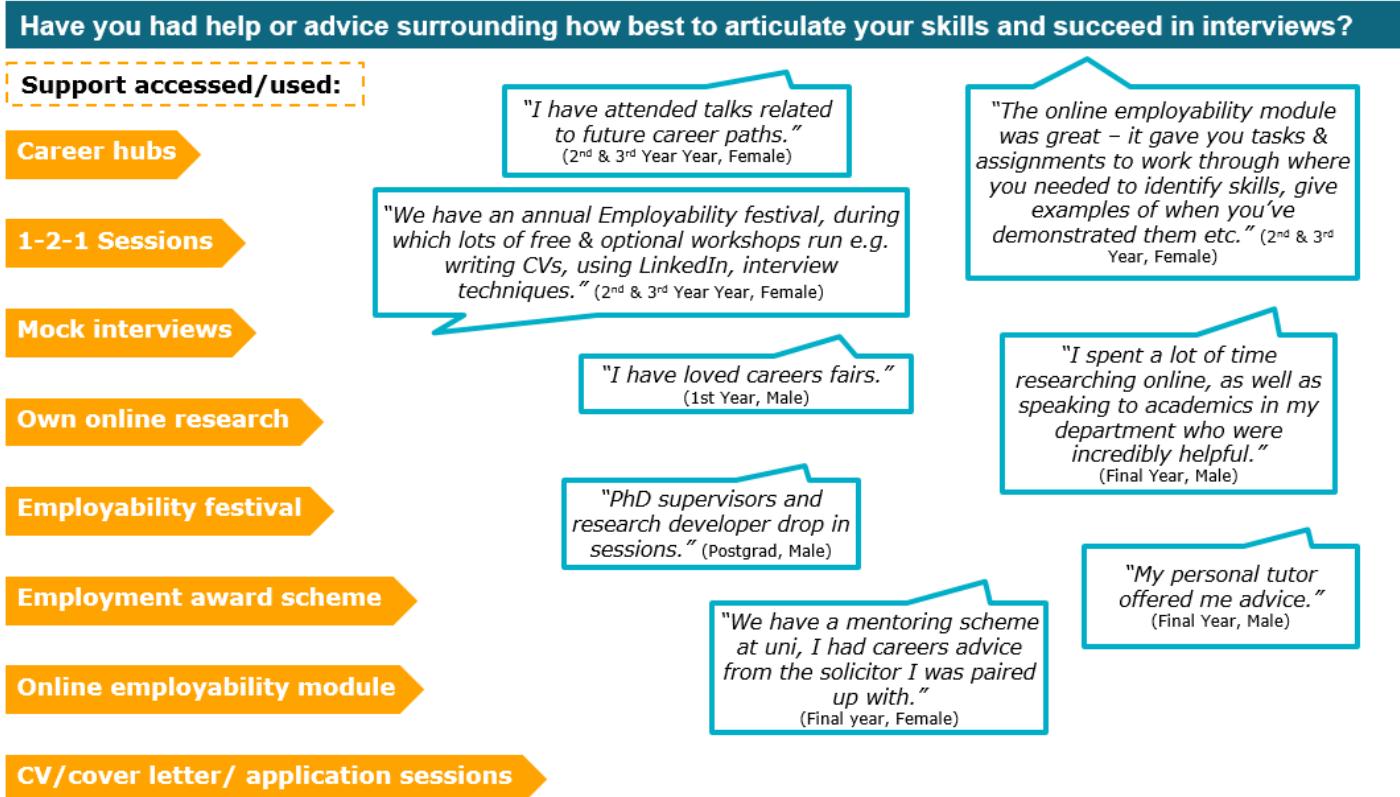
As such, students sometimes felt that the services were possibly more helpful at undergraduate level and think that the careers services could be improved by being more personalised and tailored.

Resources: Figure 9**Have you had any experience with your university or students' union career services?**

4.2 What other help or advice have AHSS students received around articulating their skills?

When asked about the help or advice they had received to help them articulate their skills, students cited a number of different sources. In the main, most students found doing their own online research was useful in helping them to understand what would be required for certain career paths, whilst others mentioned employability modules that were optional at their university, employability award schemes, mock interviews, 1-2-1 sessions, workshops and careers fairs.

Whilst students did find the majority of these sources to be helpful, it seems that they mostly received advice on more basic things like writing a strong CV and application processes. Some students did get more specific advice from personal tutors or their lecturers and others were able to practise identifying their skills and how they can demonstrate them through employability modules which were mentioned as being useful in more than one group.

Resources: Figure 10

4.3 What resources are missing or would AHSS students like to have to help them identify and demonstrate skills in the future?

AHSS students recognise that there is already a lot of resources to help them and that they just need to make more use of them. Some said they are already happy with the amount of information they have and wouldn't want any more/ too much because it could be overwhelming or get lost amongst all the other information their university provides.

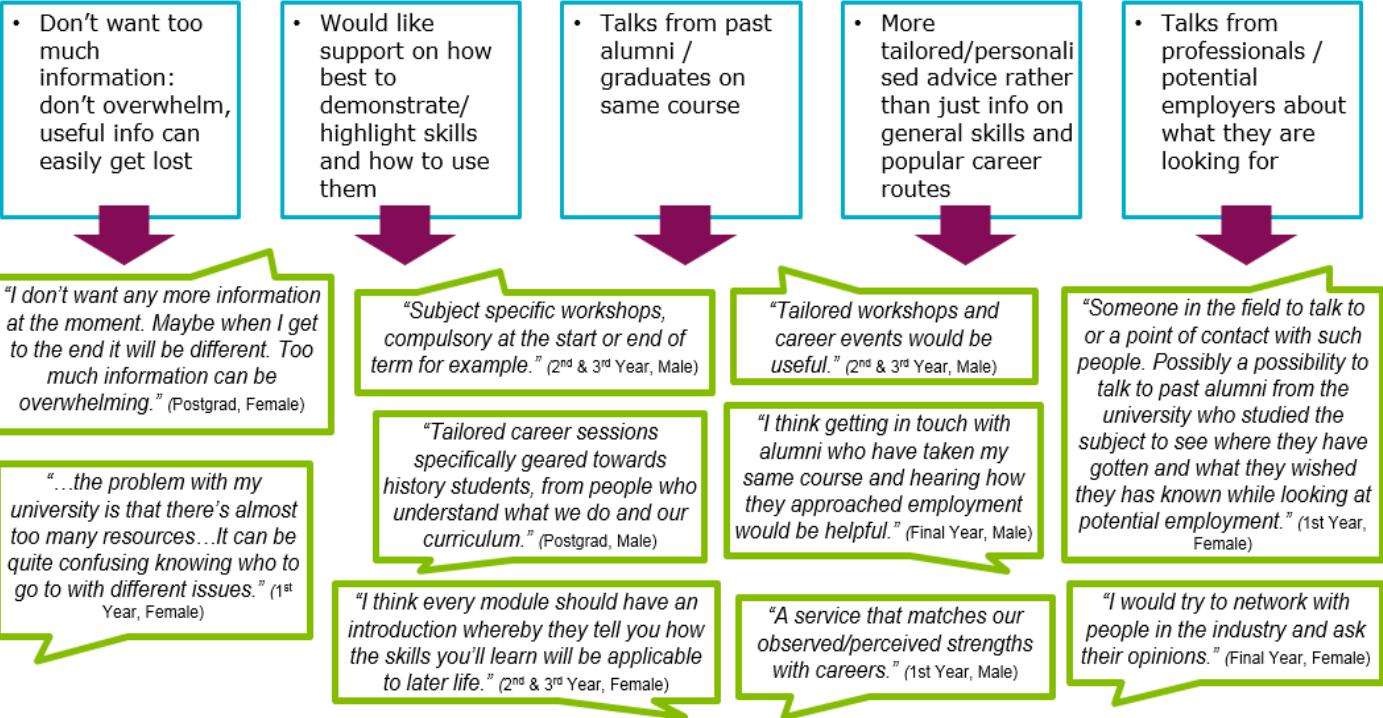
More support on how best to demonstrate or highlight their skills was a key resource students would like, as although they do get CV writing support etc., it seems there is a gap between this and actually knowing how to show the skills outside of this.

One way to address this for some is by tailoring or personalising information, perhaps by matching their skills with career paths and not making it too general. Talks from past graduates or alumni who did the same course, as well as talks from professionals or potential employers on what they are looking for, and the different routes available, would also be appreciated so they can see specifically how people with a similar skill set to them have used those skills and what they need to do to achieve their career goals.

Other students also mentioned that at the start of modules on their course it might be useful for the lecturer to highlight what skills they will learn from that module and how it can be used.

Resources: Figure 11

What resources would be helpful to you for the following: Recognising the skills you have and how they can be used | Understanding what skills you need for your future | Knowing how to best demonstrate the skills you have | Knowing where and how to develop your skills or learn new skills?



Conclusion

Conclusion

Overall, AHSS students generally have a good level of awareness about the skills that they actually have. This is especially apparent when discussing skills gained from their course and how that will help them with their future career goals rather than those that will help them in their day to day life.

Positively, many AHSS students felt that their course leaves them open to a number of different career paths due to having increased confidence in their abilities since going to university and a range of transferable skills. However, it is important to recognise that not all of them are interested in popular career routes traditionally associated with these types of courses e.g. teaching. As such, more support around showing them how their specific skills and qualifications can actually be demonstrated, as well as helping them to find roles and identify career paths that are more specifically related to them will be key.