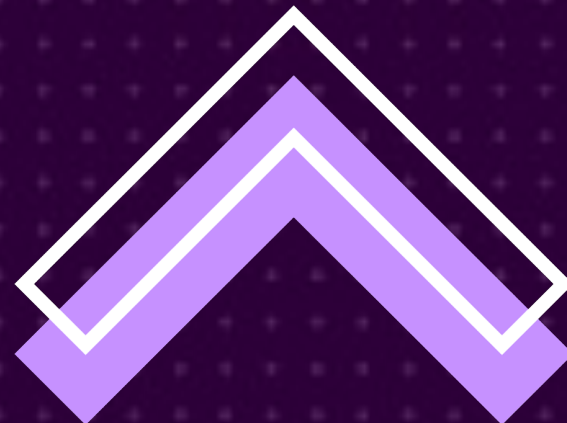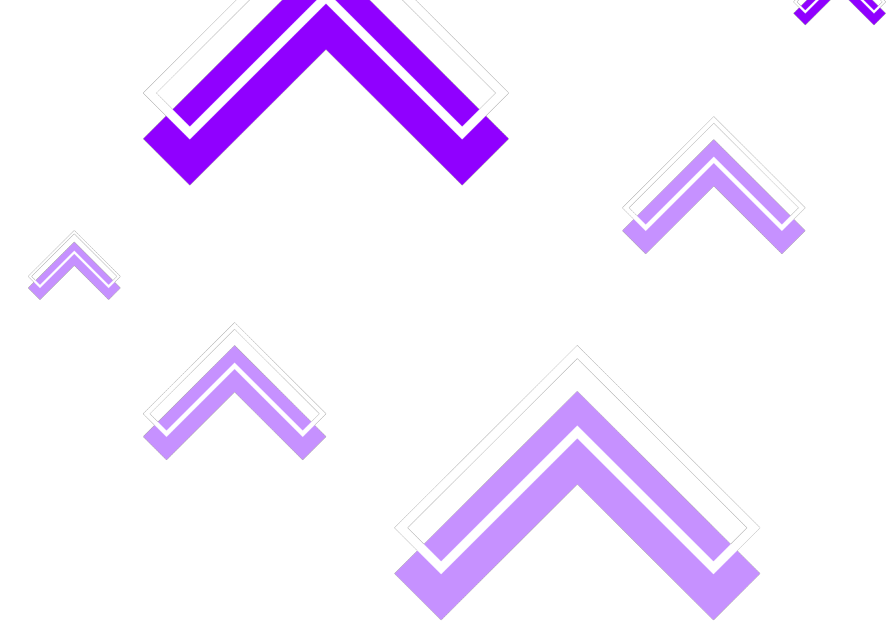# WONKHE

SKILLS TO THRIVE

A Wonkhe x Adobe survey | January 2021

In partnership with

Adobe

Background

The idea that university should equip students with graduate skills (also known as soft, or transferable, or employability, or life skills) is part of the higher education value proposition:

- recognising the complexities of a world in which specific knowledge quickly becomes redundant, but a wider skillset combined with the ability to continue to learn sets graduates apart;

- preparing students for a range of possible graduate careers, especially in non-vocational subjects.

The range of "hard" and "soft" skills employers want graduates to demonstrate is proliferating – and employers are frequently (though not consistently) sceptical about graduates' skills. Adobe's Get Hired research (November 2019) found a significant gap between the main skills employers want and those applicants demonstrate on their CVs.

Many universities have adopted a defined set of graduate attributes they intend students should gain from higher education - these frequently express a core set of institutional values and set a direction for pedagogy and student development.

Though graduate attributes and employability and student development strategies may be set centrally, skills like communication, or critical thinking, cannot exist independently of a subject or professional context. Embedding them meaningfully in curricula means giving them serious thought at subject level. There's also PSRB requirements, the extra-curricular landscape and the "hidden curriculum" to consider.

Who responded
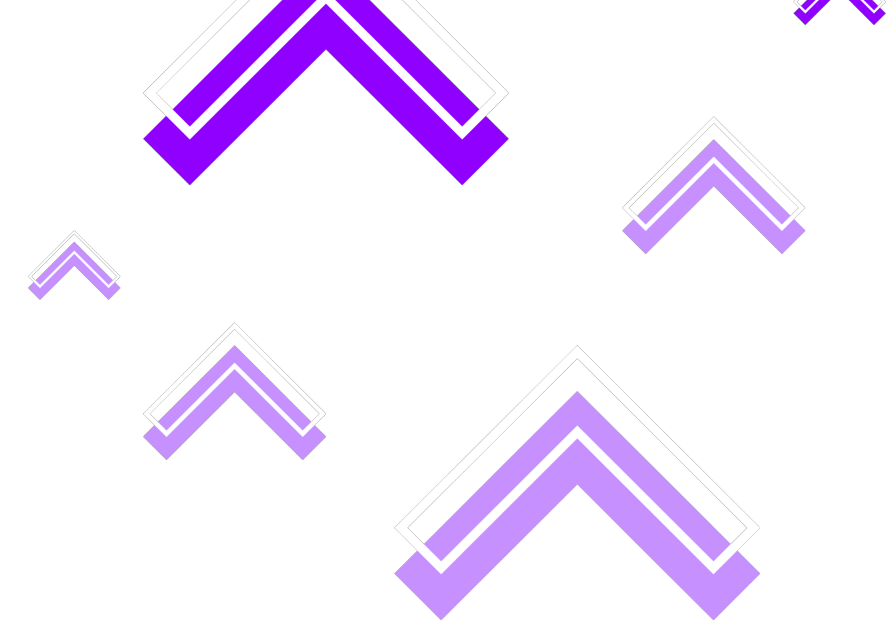
Sample: 826 academics and academic-adjacent professionals in UK HE

Survey open August-September 2020

87.5% in England

44.8% in pre-92 universities | 42.8 in modern universities | 3.9% in specialist providers | 2.9% in independent providers | 1.7% in FE | 3.9% in other

6.2% senior managers | 29.4% mid-level managers | 54% intermediate/other | 10.5% early career

80.7% on full-time, permanent contracts

15.6% in sciences (medicine/veterinary, allied subjects, agriculture, physical, mathematical, computing, engineering)

36% in AHSS (architecture, geography, law, education, social sciences, business, media, languages, literary, historical, philosophical, religious studies)
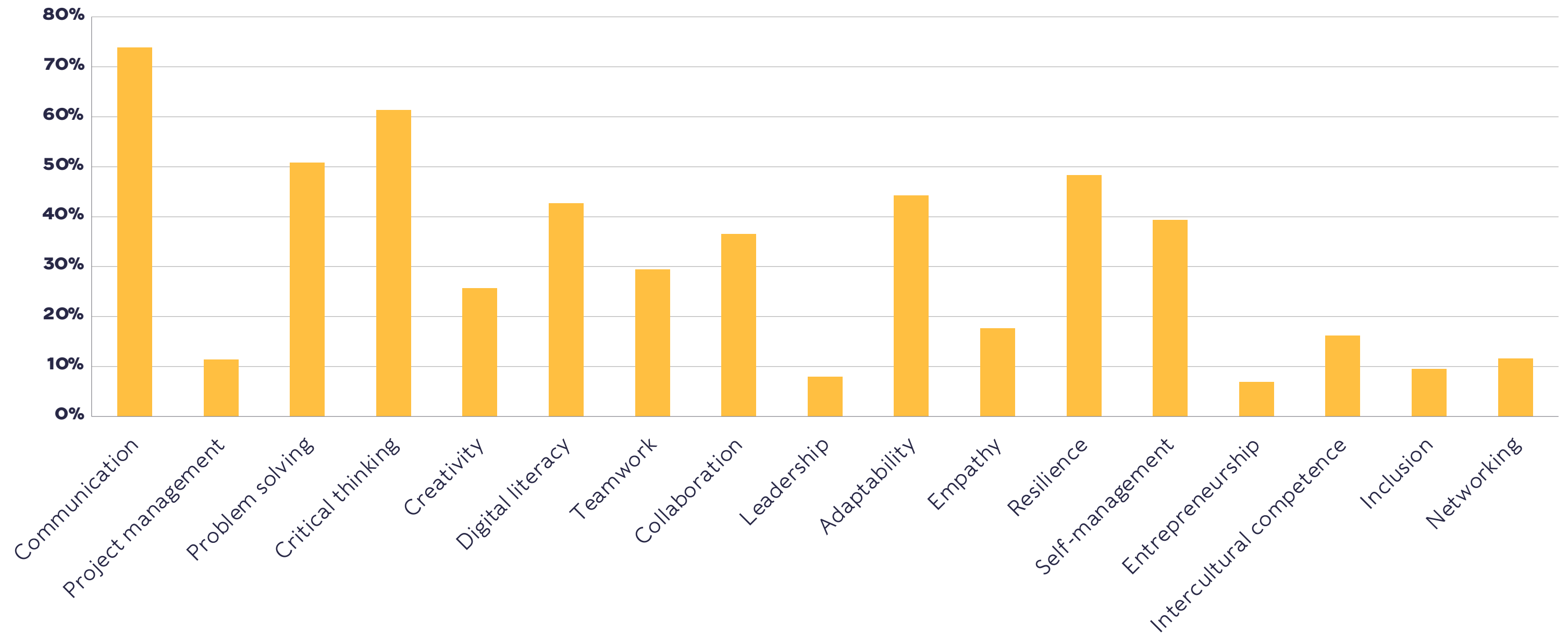
46% academic-adjacent (educational or academic development, learning technology, quality or academic services, library services, careers)

2.4% other (widening participation, student services, knowledge exchange, work-based learning)
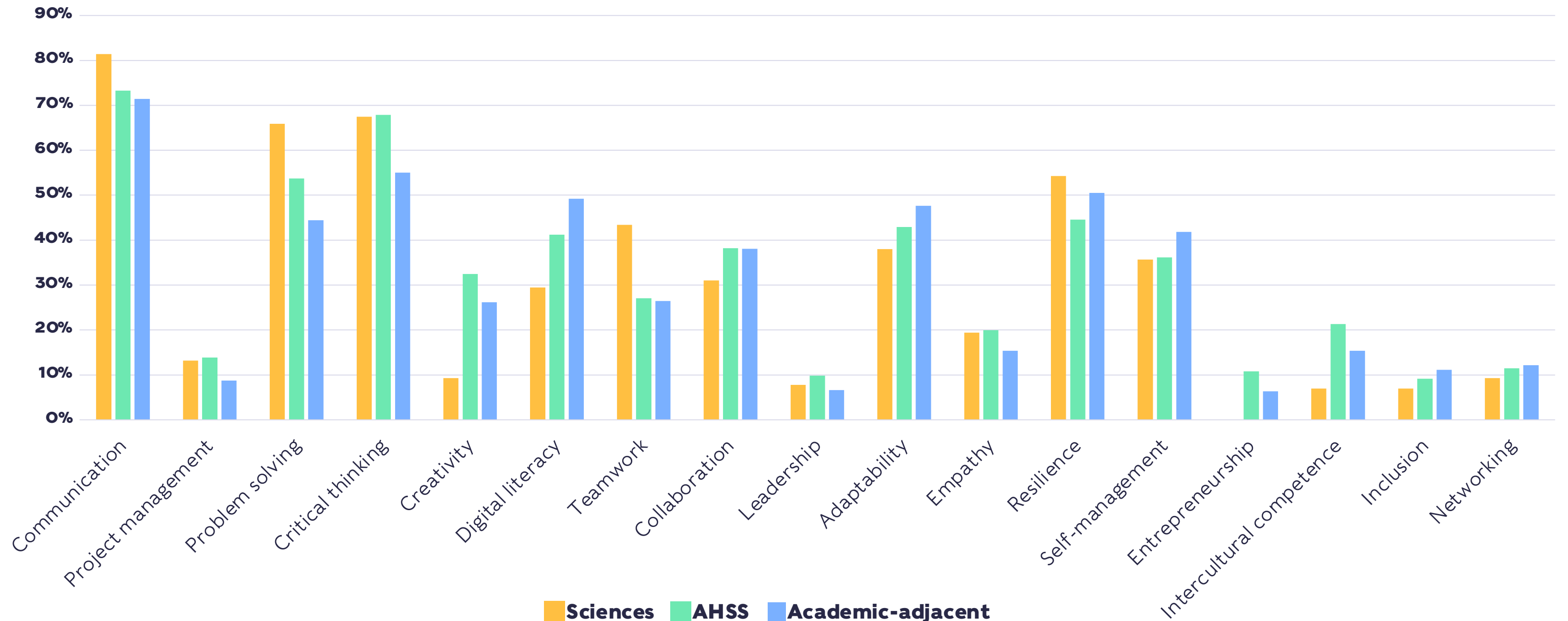
Essential skills

Which soft skills would you consider essential for your graduates to be able to thrive in their future lives?
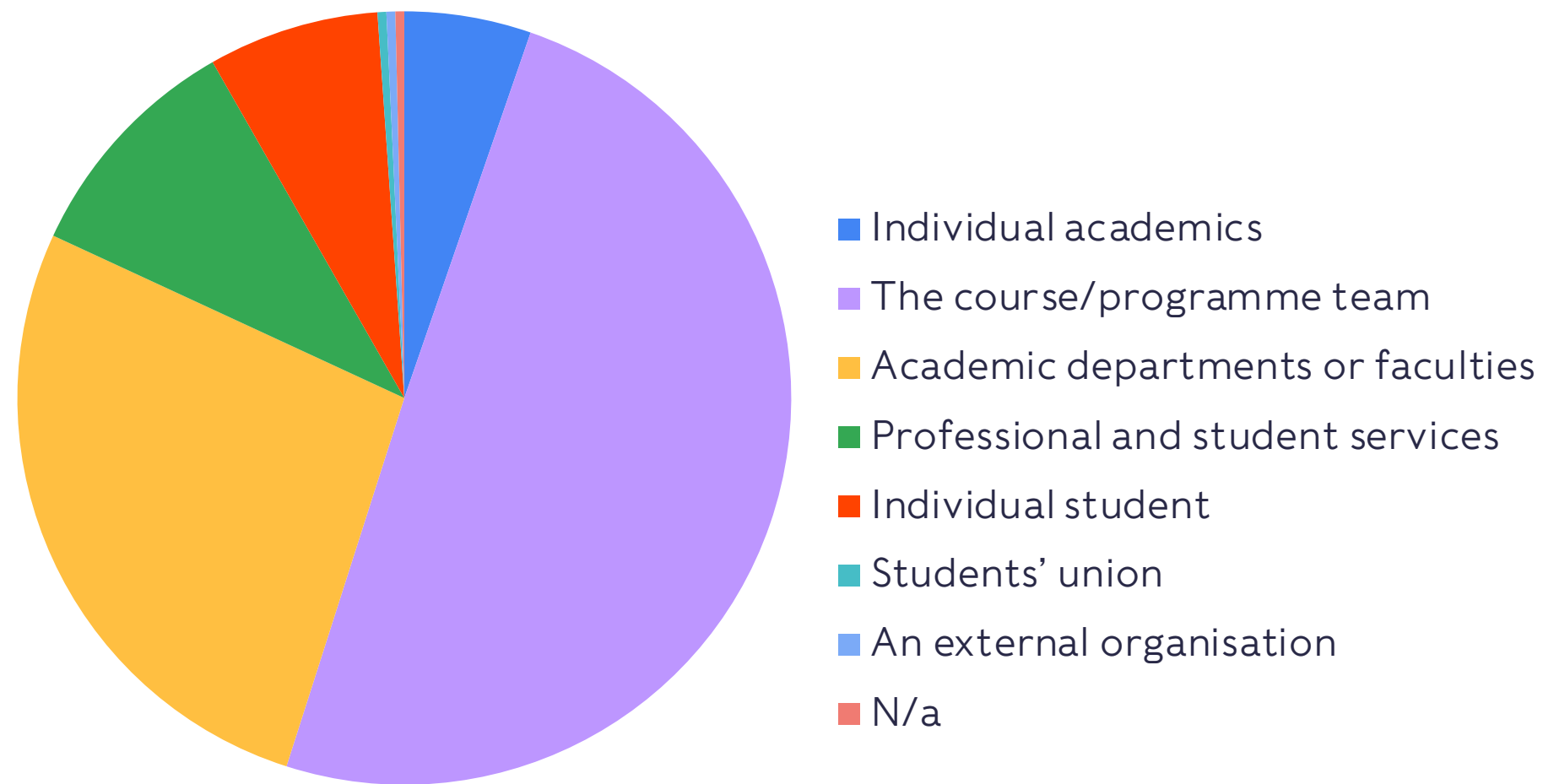
Which soft skills would you consider essential for your graduates to be able to thrive in their future lives – split by subject/professional area

Legend: Sciences, AHSS, Academic-adjacent

Where does primary responsibility lie for ensuring that...

Students understand the soft skills they could/should be acquiring during their time at university

- Individual academics
- The course/programme team
- Academic departments or faculties
- Professional and student services
- Individual student
- Students' union
- An external organisation
- N/a

"*Important that students do not feel pressured to develop soft skill skills (which would be the case if this was monitored in some formal way), as this would add to already significant levels of stress relating to degree completion. Instead, universities should have clear lines on importance of soft skills for future careers, and have a range of opportunities available for students to focus on developing these in a variety of ways, should they wish to.*"
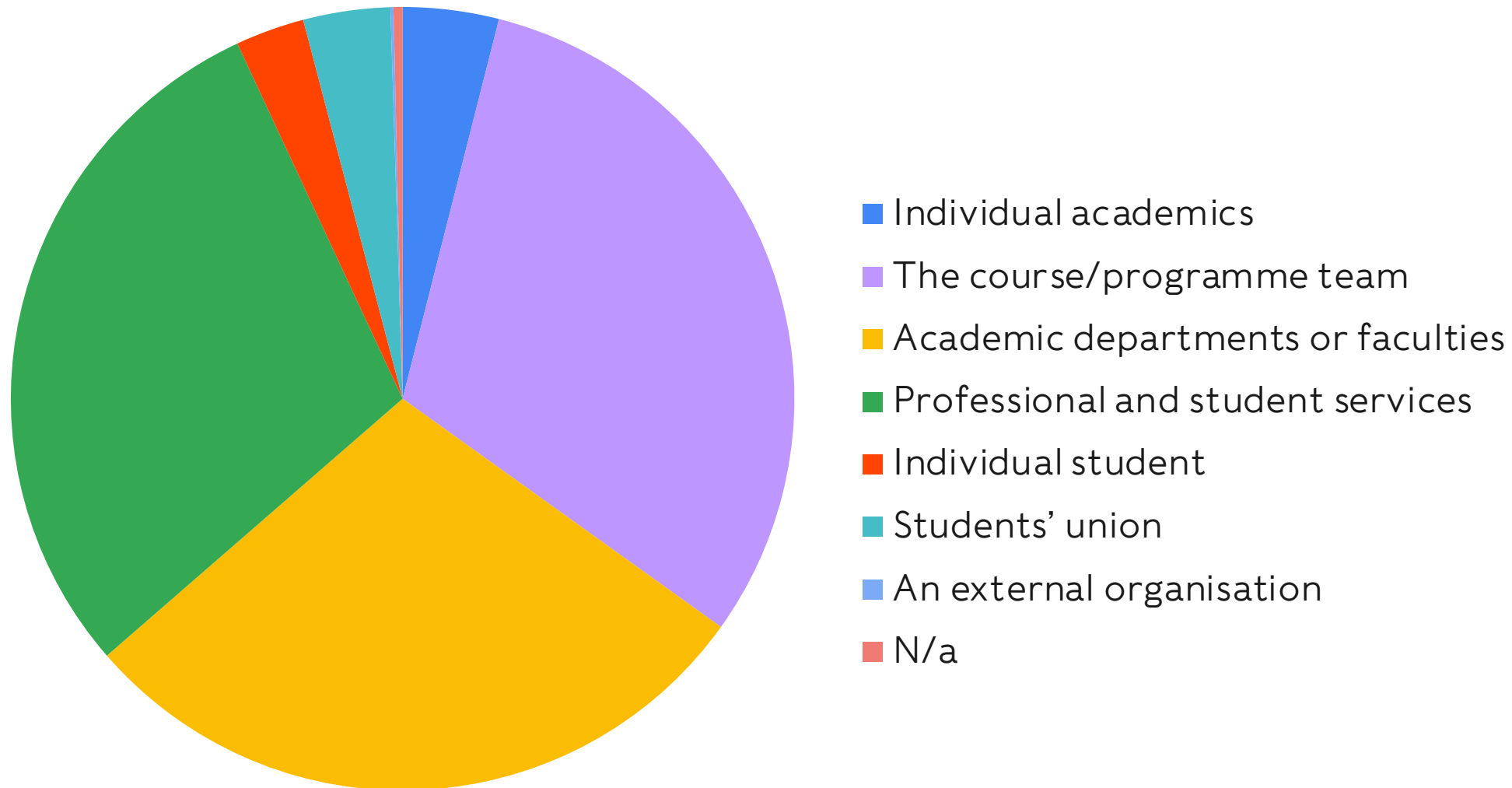
Students understand what activities and experiences will help them to develop those skills

- Individual academics
- The course/programme team
- Academic departments or faculties
- Professional and student services
- Individual student
- Students' union
- An external organisation
- N/a
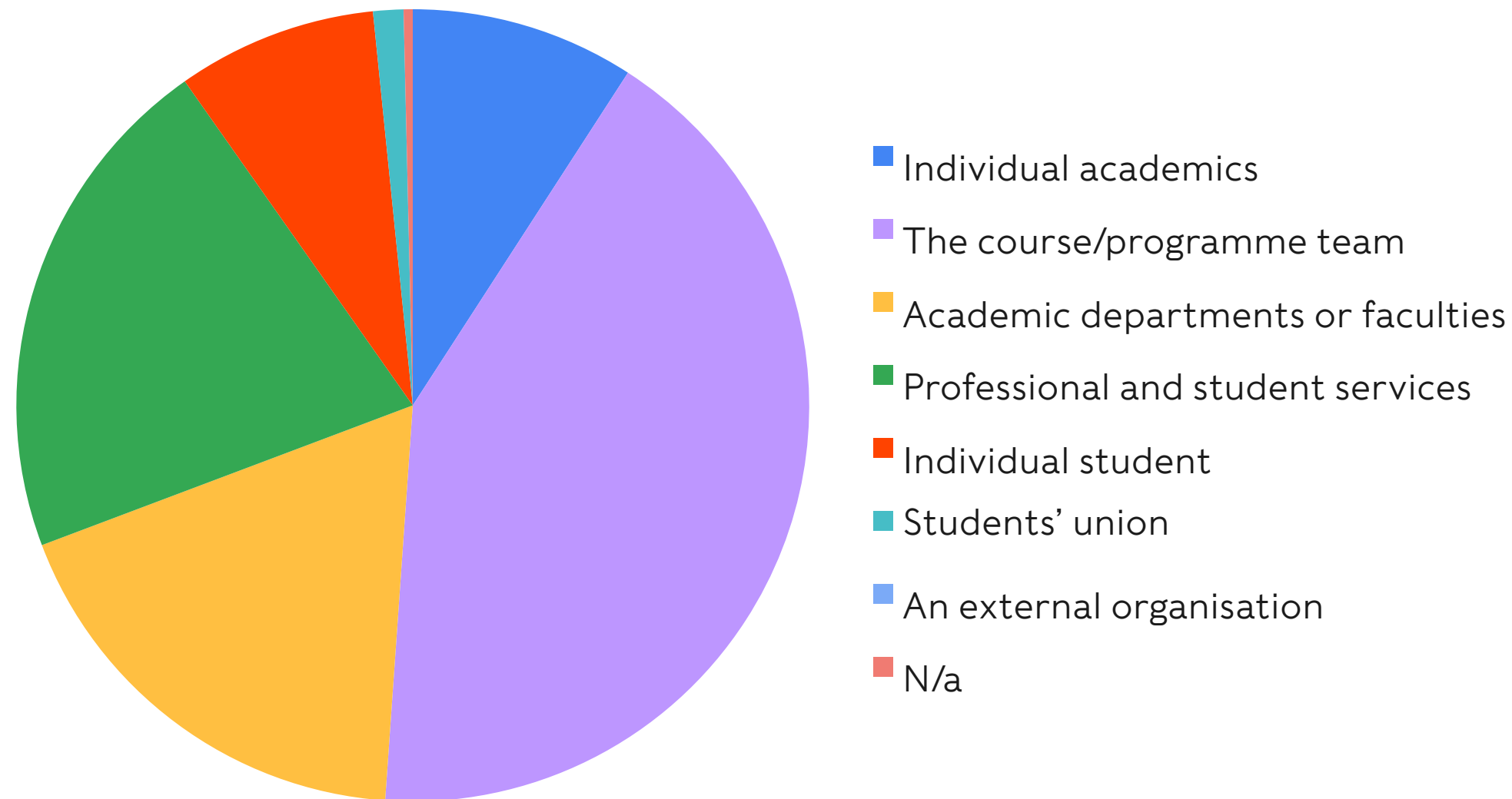
"As a former university student myself, I was always aware of 'soft/transferable' skills and knew that I was gaining them through essay writing/presentations/teamwork etc. However, it wasn't really discussed throughout my course and I would have liked the opportunity to reflect on them more often."

"Soft skills are the responsibility of all those who work within higher education, rather than the responsibility of one particular department or academic."

Students have access to activities and experiences that will help them develop soft skills

- ■ Individual academics
- ■ The course/programme team
- ■ Academic departments or faculties
- ■ Professional and student services
- ■ Individual student
- ■ Students' union
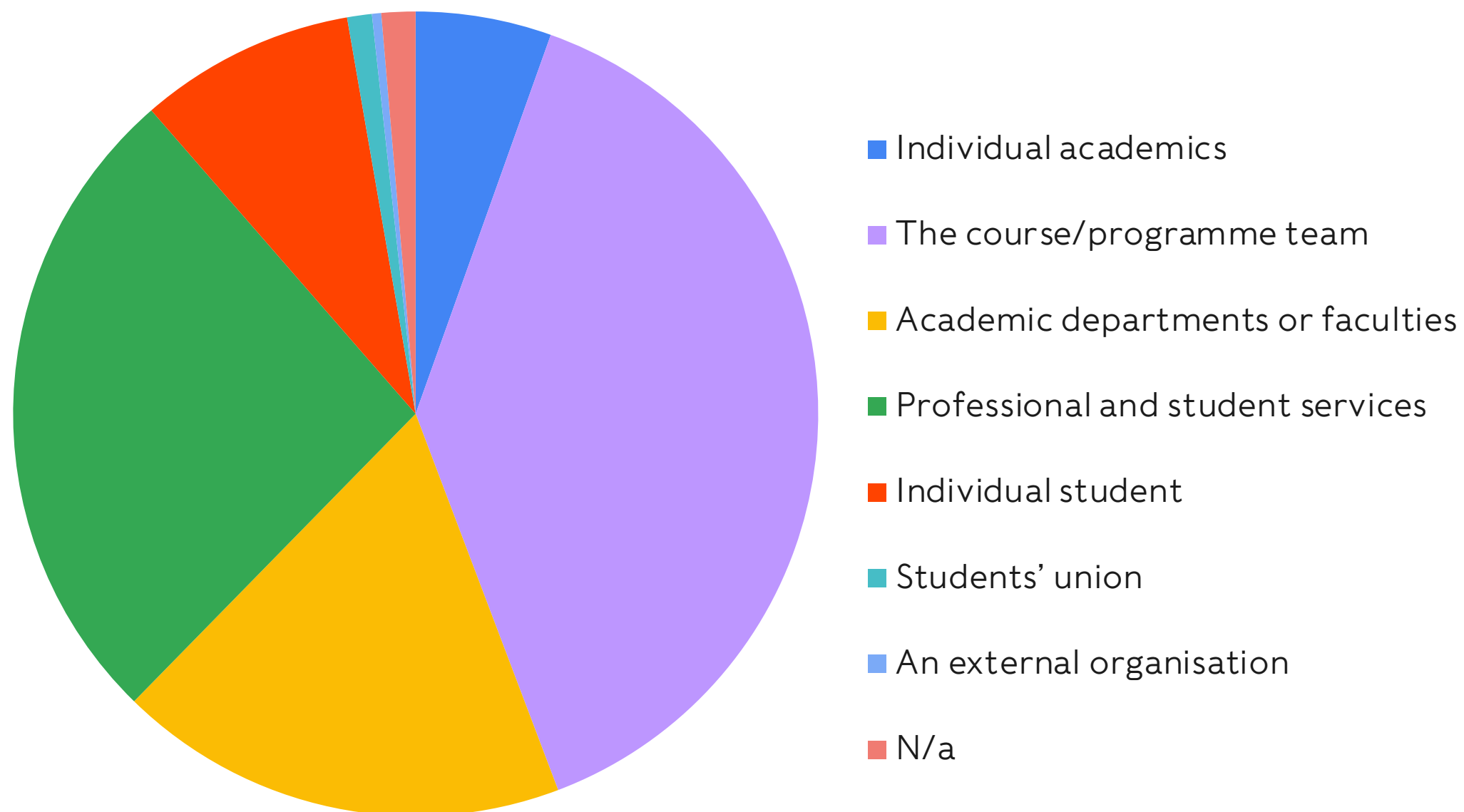- ■ An external organisation
- ■ N/a

"Students won't take them seriously unless they attract credit in some way"

"Raising students' awareness of a) what soft skills are, b) why they matter, and c) how to develop them while at university is increasingly the focus of my careers workshops. The lack of understanding is staggering."

"A university should not grade a student on soft skills but should ensure there is opportunity for students to learn how to extract skills from lived experience and sell this successfully on application."

Students have the opportunity and tools to reflect on and log the activities and experiences that helped them acquire soft skills

- Individual academics
- The course/programme team
- Academic departments or faculties
- Professional and student services
- Individual student
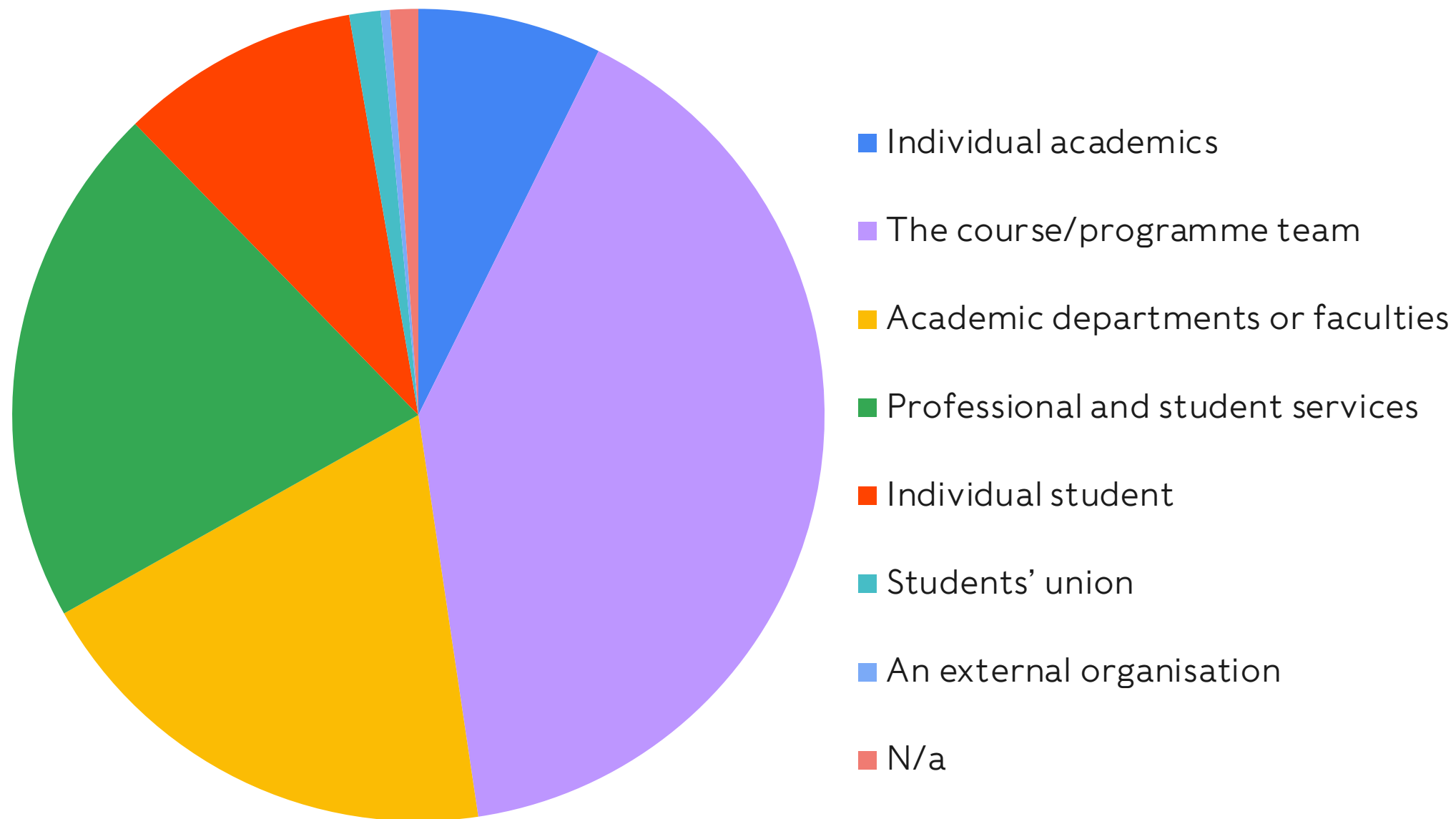- Students' union
- An external organisation
- N/a

"There is a huge disconnect between the skills students are developing, and their understanding of them. It is crucial that on top of the opportunity to develop these skills, students are also given lessons in understanding them and communicating them, as well as being able to match them with industry expectations (ie, interpreting job descriptions, researching careers, and self-promotion/marketing through application materials and interview techniques). All too often I have students with the skills needed for a role, but insufficient understanding that they have them, and inability to demonstrate this effectively in CVs/application forms/interviews."
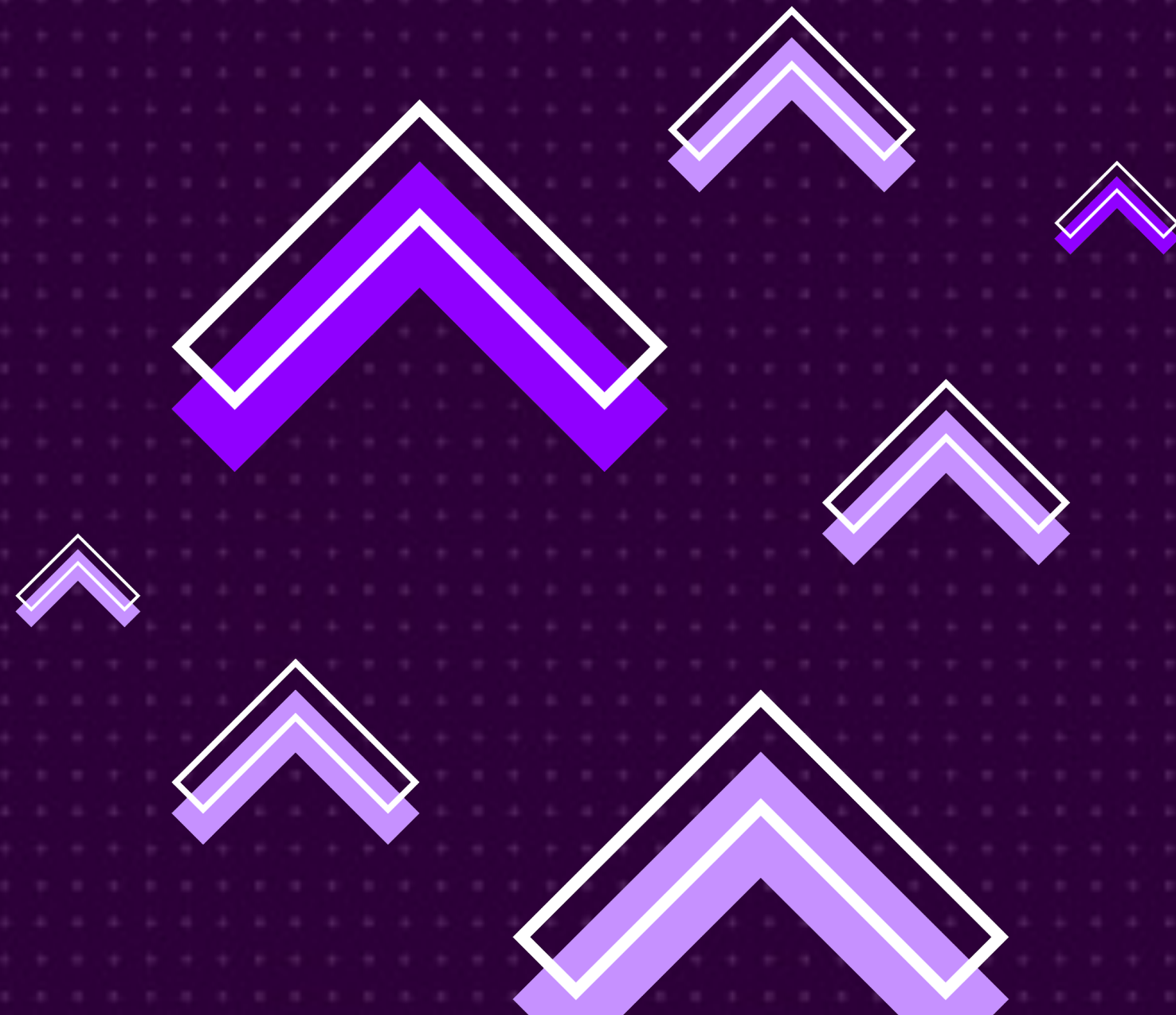
Students have the opportunity to evidence their acquisition of soft skills

Legend:
- Individual academics
- The course/programme team
- Academic departments or faculties
- Professional and student services
- Individual student
- Students' union
- An external organisation
- N/a

"Soft skills should be embedded within curricula so that all students may have the opportunity to develop them. Extra curricular development is not open to all."
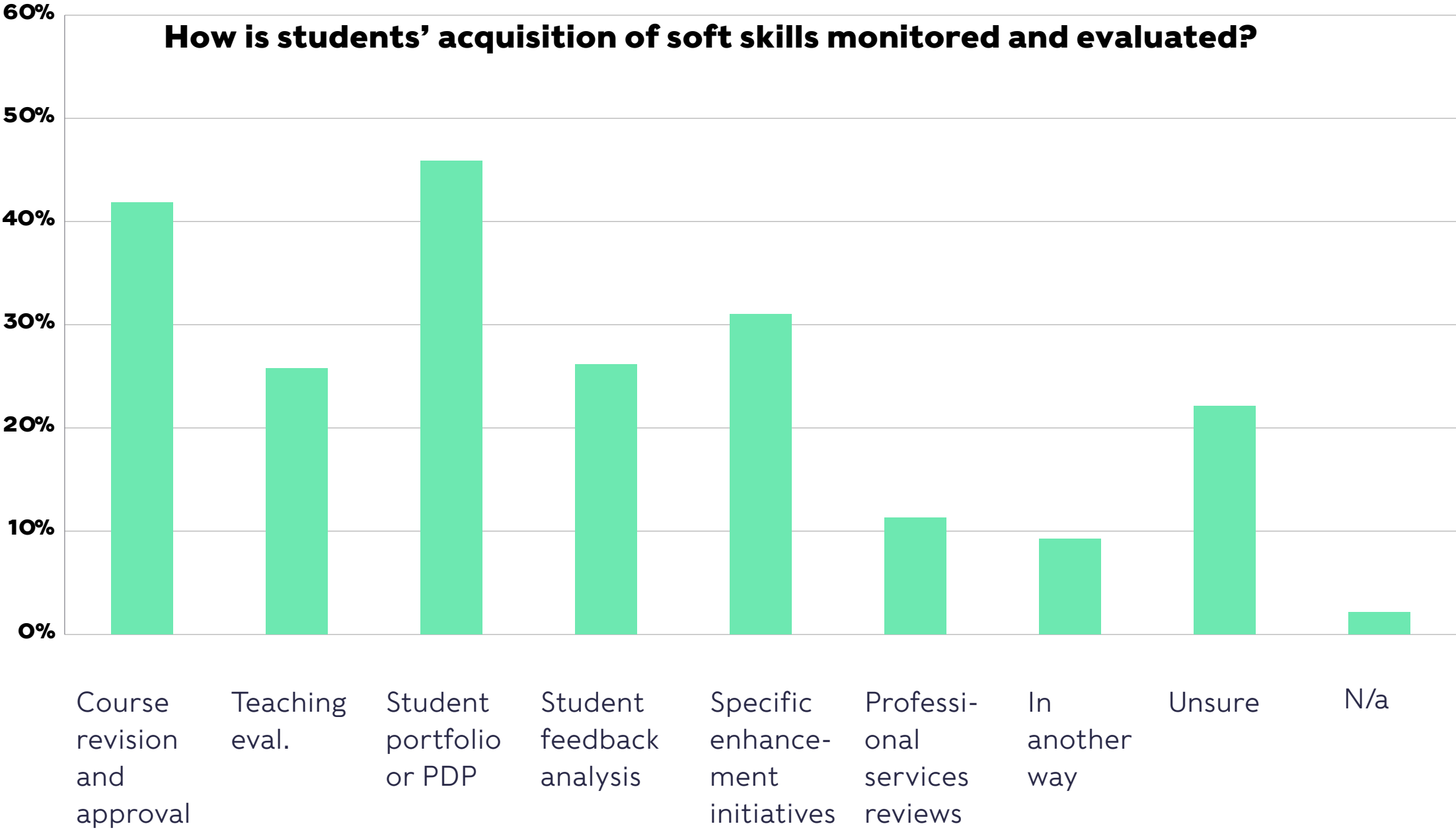
"It's hard to define a complete set/class of soft skills, better to raise awareness of them and facilitate learning about them as such and then let students decide for themselves which are RELEVANT to them and of INTEREST to them to pursue and develop on their own terms. Development/accomplishment is hard to measure, evaluate and define objectively as their possession/expression/ is so subjective."

Institutional and subject-level approaches

Institutional approaches to skills

How is students' acquisition of soft skills monitored and evaluated?

Category	Percentage
Course revision and approval	~42%
Teaching eval.	~26%
Student portfolio or PDP	~46%
Student feedback analysis	~26%
Specific enhancement initiatives	~31%
Professional services reviews	~11%
In another way	~9%
Unsure	~22%
N/a	~2%

GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

36% said their institution uses universal graduate attributes and a further 13.8% said these are used "in some areas"

Of those who said these are used (n=302) 66.2% said they are used as a reference point in curriculum design and a further 26.2% said they are used as a reference point in some areas

EVALUATION

"Soft skills workshops –optional"

"It varies course by course, there is no consistent approach"

"Placement reports and feedback from employers"

"Through assessment design e.g. presentations, group projects, research projects, etc"

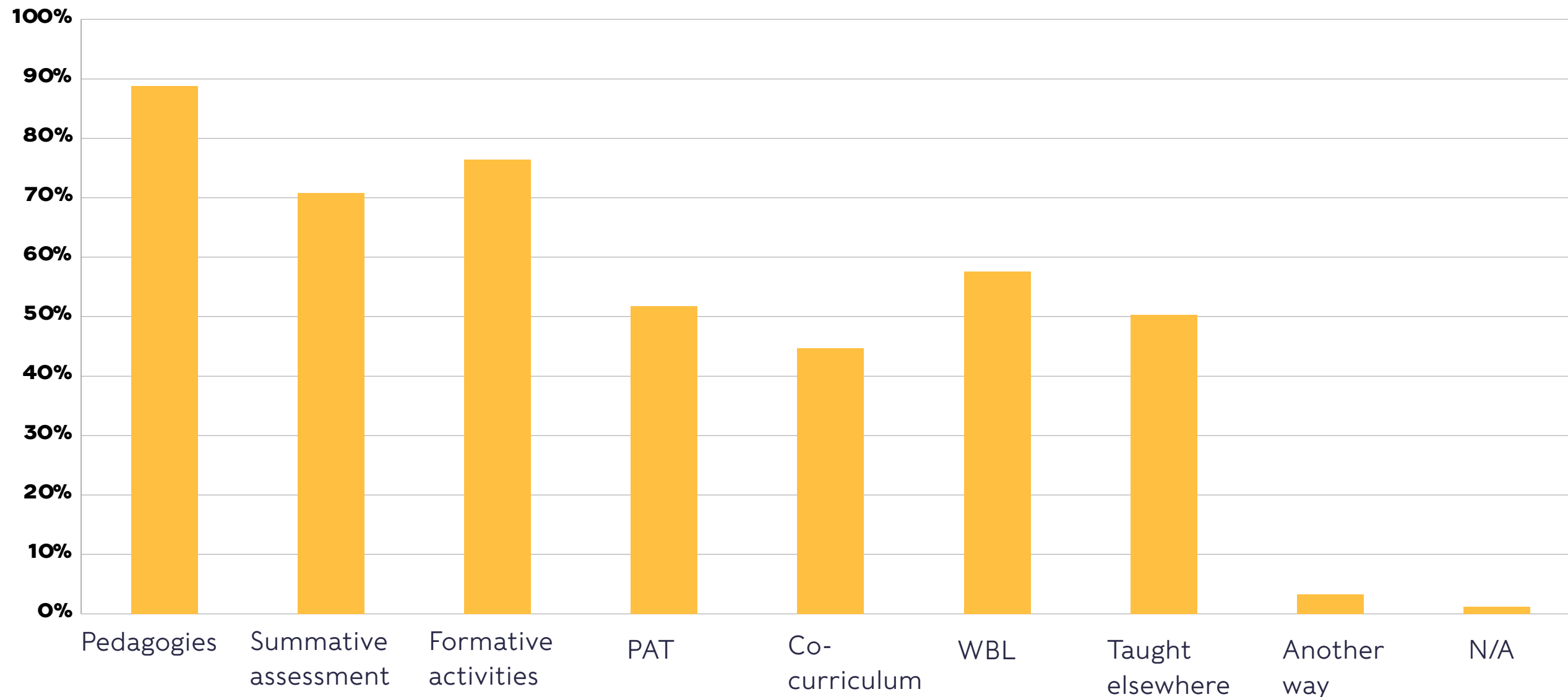"Placement awards and student reflection and institutional awards"

"I'm not aware of these skills being monitored and evaluated, but they should be"

What factors inform your approach in your subject area?*
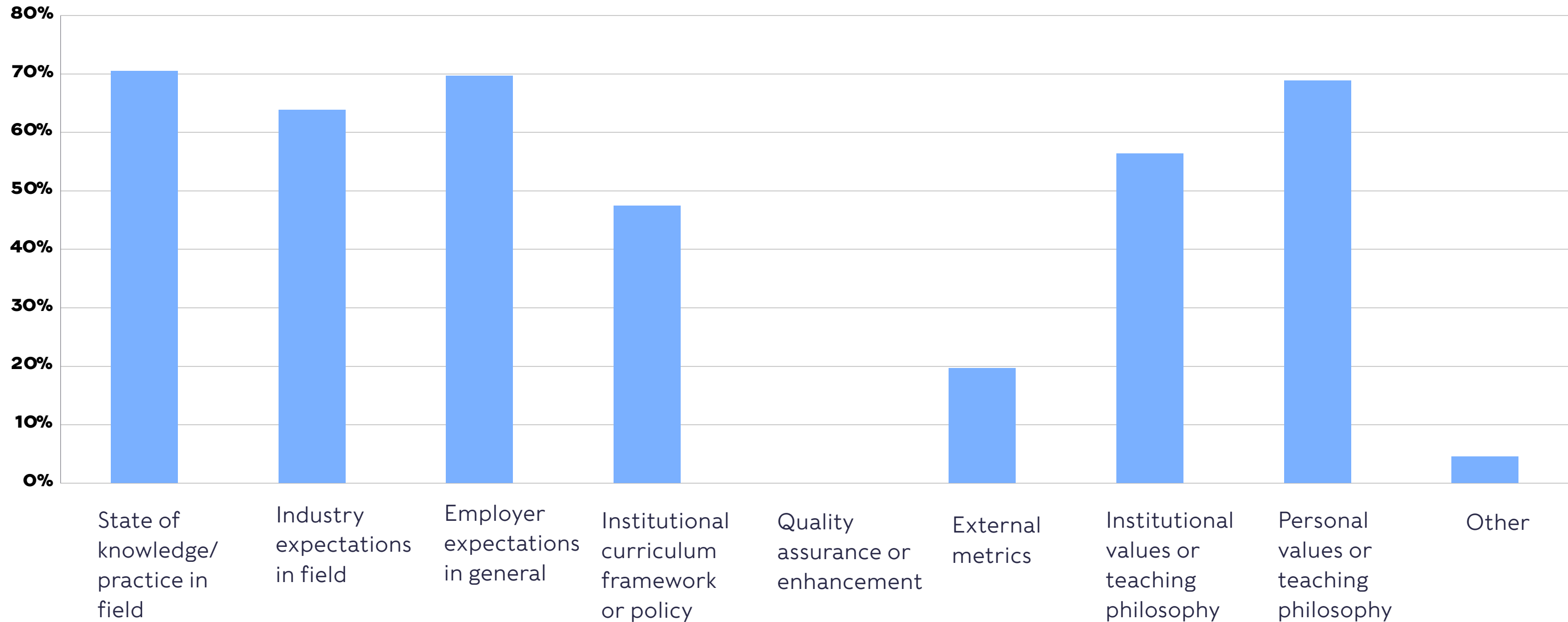
*Only includes respondents who were actively teaching N=483

How are soft skills embedded in the curriculum in your subject area?

There was no serious variation in subject grouping on this question.

Category	Percentage
Pedagogies	~89%
Summative assessment	~71%
Formative activities	~76%
PAT	~52%
Co-curriculum	~45%
WBL	~58%
Taught elsewhere	~50%
Another way	~3%
N/A	~1%

*Only includes respondents who were actively teaching N=483

Views

What's your opinion of the value of soft skills to preparing students for their future lives?

87.3% said they are very valuable and 11.7% said they are valuable in some circumstances/with caveats

How effectively do you think your institution supports students to develop soft skills? (1-5)

	Answered 4 or 5	Answered 3	Answered 1 or 2
Total (n=823)	48.5%	36%	15.6%
Sciences (n=129)	59.7%	30.2%	10.1%
AHSS (n-294)	49.7%	36.4%	14%
Academic-adjacent (377)	45.4%	36.6%	15.1%

Thank you

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