

2023 Character Development at University: Students Poll

The Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, University of Birmingham

Summary of Results

July 2023

Yonder conducted an online survey with 804 UK adults 18+ who are currently enrolled in a UK university. Fieldwork was conducted between the 26th to the 29nd of June 2023. No weighting was applied to the data.

Profile of Sample:

The gender and age profile of the sample was as follows, 305 males (38%), 497 females (62%), 510 respondents aged 18-24 (63%), 229 aged 25-34 (28%), 38 aged 35-44 (5%), 20 aged 45-54 (2%) and 7 aged 55-64 (1%).

The course type profile of the sample was as follows, 444 respondents indicated that they were enrolled as undergraduates on BA/BEEd/BSc/BEng courses (55%), 328 respondents indicated that they were enrolled as postgraduates on MA/MEd/MRes/MSc/MBA/MPA/PGCE/PGDip/PhD/DPhil/EdD courses (41%) and 32 indicated that they were enrolled on 'other' courses (4%).

633 respondents were studying full time (79%) and 171 respondents were studying part time (21%). 666 respondents were campus based (83%) and 125 respondents were distance/online learning (16%), 12 respondents said 'other' (2%).

302 respondents were in their first year of university (38%), 254 respondents were in their second year of university (32%), 165 respondents were in their third year of university (21%), 65 were in their fourth year of university (8%), 12 respondents were in their fifth year of university (1%) and 6 respondents were beyond their 5th year of university (1%).

Subjects	Number of completed surveys	Percentage of sample
STEM subjects	226	28%
Business & Law	143	18%
Social Sciences	120	15%
Healthcare	112	14%
Arts and Humanities	100	12%
Education	37	5%
Other subject	43	5%
Languages	23	3%

The importance of developing positive character traits whilst at university

- The survey started by asking respondents to rate the importance of developing the following 8 traits whilst in university. Overall, critical thinking was seen as the most important¹ trait amongst students (86%), followed by reflection, resilience, and confidence (82% respectively).

Traits	Important (NET)
Critical thinking ²	86%
Reflection ³	82%
Resilience ⁴	82%
Confidence ⁵	82%
Civility ⁶	79%
Integrity ⁷	78%
Compassion ⁸	76%
Volunteering ⁹	52%

- Whereas volunteering was considered important by the lowest proportion (52%).
 - The findings indicated that females were more likely than males to rate each attribute as important. Particularly, reflection (85% vs 76% of males) and integrity (83% vs 71% of males).

¹ Please note, that importance scores stated are an aggregated net of the top two or bottom two scores of the 5-point scale (5 = Extremely important and 1 = Not at all important), unless otherwise stated.

² Critical thinking was defined as a person's ability to think reflectively and come to independent conclusions

³ Reflection was defined as the ability to ponder alternative possibilities and not jump to conclusions

⁴ Resilience was defined as a person's ability to bounce back despite obstacles

⁵ Confidence was defined as a person who is certain of their own abilities, the abilities of others, or that a certain course of action is best

⁶ Civility was defined as being polite and courteous in behaviour and speech in relation to others

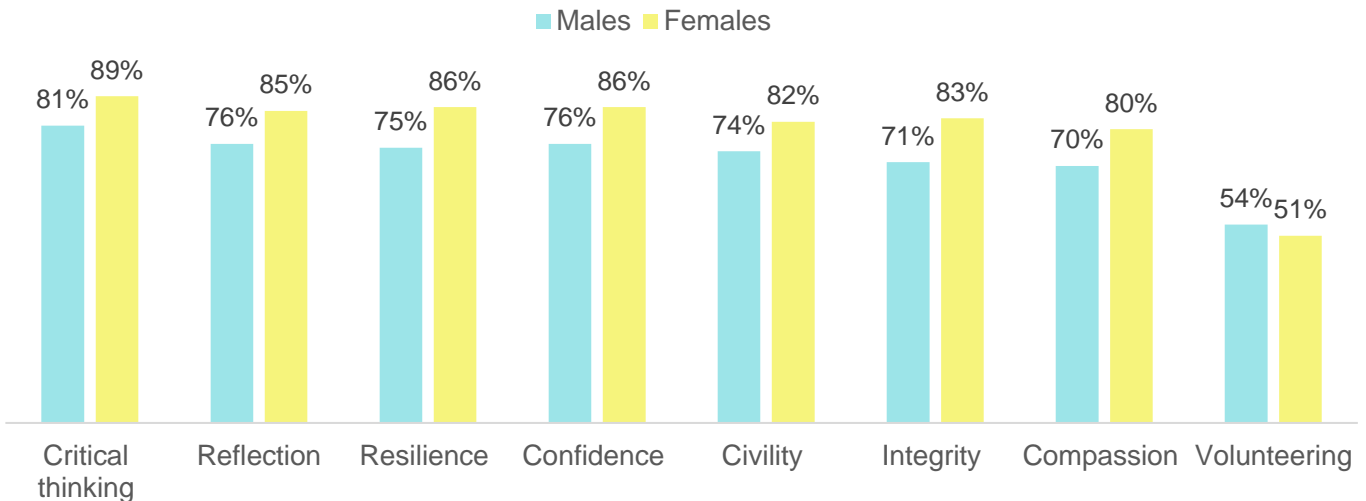
⁷ Integrity was defined as the quality of having and following strong moral principles

⁸ Compassion was defined as the ability to exhibit care and concern for others in need

⁹ Volunteering was defined as giving time to help others

- Compared to just 70% of males, 4 in 5 (80%) females believed compassion to be important. Resilience is also important to 86% of females compared to 75% of males, who say this.

Importance of character traits by gender



- Healthcare students found resilience (89%), compassion (87%) and integrity (86%) to be particularly important when compared to the overall total.

— Resilience was considered extremely important by half of those surveyed (50%), driven by students studying STEM subjects (57%) and undergraduate students (54%).

— Despite, volunteering seen as low importance in comparison to the other traits (52%) – 20% rated volunteering as ‘extremely important’, and this was driven by older students aged 35-44* (37%).

The role of universities in offering opportunities to develop their students’ character

Respondents were then asked questions about students being given opportunities to develop ‘character’¹⁰ whilst at university.

The importance for universities to provide students with opportunities

- The majority of students surveyed agreed it is important for universities to provide students with opportunities to develop their character (84%), whilst 13% neither agreed nor disagreed and 2% disagreed.
 - Healthcare students in particular felt this was important (91%), as did full time students (86%) and females (87%).
 - The top three reasons, ranked first[^] for agreeing that it is important for universities to provide students with opportunities to develop their character include, helping to develop life skills (35%), universities should help people to become good citizens (22%) and this will help with careers/ employability (21%) and build resilience and coping mechanisms (21%).

¹⁰ Character was defined as a set of personal traits or disposition that inform motivation, and guide conduct. To talk of someone’s character is to talk of who they are deep down.

- Only a small proportion disagreed that it is important for universities to provide students with opportunities to develop their character (2%). More than one in ten neither agreed nor disagreed (13%) with this statement, these tended to be males (17%) and those aged 25-34 years old (17%)

How can universities provide opportunities to develop character?

- According to the students who agreed that it is important for universities to give opportunities for character development, the top approaches cited were work experience opportunities (49%), followed by leadership roles (44%) and peer group interactions and friendships (44%).
 - Students who study arts and humanities and healthcare (both 58%) think work experience opportunities is the best way to develop character.
 - Social interactions amongst peers and friends at university is seen as a good way to develop character amongst healthcare students (54%) and undergraduate students in particular (47% vs 37% of postgraduate students).

Opportunities to develop character outside of taught courses

- Opportunities outside of education such as study/work abroad opportunities (42%) and volunteering and community service activities (41%) are also considered good ways to develop character, especially amongst arts and humanities students (56 and 52%, respectively).
- 2 in 3 (66%) students surveyed, agreed that their university does offer opportunities outside of their course/programme for them to develop their character.
 - Especially those aged 18-24 years old (70%) and 35-44 (74%).
 - A quarter strongly agreed (24%) with this, driven largely by undergraduates (27%) compared to postgraduate students (18%).

Opportunities to develop character within taught university courses

- Other opportunities to develop character within taught university courses are not as popular amongst students. With less than 3 in 10 of those who agreed it is important for universities to provide opportunities to develop their character, believe final year projects and dissertations (29%), being taught via university courses (28%) and academic competitions and fairs (25%) are good ways to develop character whilst at university.
- Despite this, 2 in 3 (67%) students surveyed agreed that their current university does offer opportunities within their course/programme to develop their character.
 - Agreement was particularly high amongst healthcare students (79%) and females (71%).
 - Business & law students (74%) were more likely than students studying STEM subjects (62%) or arts & humanities (62%) or education (49%) to agree that their university offers opportunities within their course/programme to develop their character.

Who is responsible for character development at university?

- Respondents who thought it is possible to develop character whilst at university were then asked whose responsibility they thought it was to provide those opportunities at university. Of those who answered[^], more than two-fifths felt the primary responsibility lay with students themselves (45%), around one-third felt it was university leaders (31%) and a fifth felt heads of colleges/departments (20%) should be responsible for providing opportunities for students to develop their character.
- Respondents were less likely to think that the primary responsibility lay with other teaching staff (11%), programme leaders (excluding personal tutors) (12%) or module leaders (excluding personal tutors) (13%).

What is most important to students: academic results or developing positive character traits?

- Although the majority of students feel it is important for universities to provide opportunities to develop their character, when forced to choose what is more important to develop whilst at university, more than half (55%) of the students surveyed believe 'good exam/academic results necessary for life, work and study' is more important than 'positive character traits necessary for life, work and study'.
- Whereas 45% of students believe developing 'positive character traits necessary for life/work and study' is more important.
 - Males are more likely to think obtaining good exam/academic results is more important (63%) than females (50%), whereas 37% of males think developing positive character traits is more important.
 - Students studying STEM Subjects are also more likely to think good academic grades are more important (65% vs 35% who think character development is more important).
 - In comparison arts and humanities students think character development is more important (57%) compared to 43% who think exam results are most important.
- When students were asked whether a greater focus on character development at university would impact their academic attainment, 73% said it would have a positive effect, 17% said it will have no effect and just 4% said it would have a negative effect, with females (77%) driving this positivity.

****Low base size, please use with caution***

^ Data rebased on responses to question

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