



The Skills Gap in Economics Degrees

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Based on Jenkins and Lane (2019), *Employability Skills in UK Economics Degrees: a report for the Economics Network*, available at: <https://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/research/employability>

Plan of action

- Is there a gap between what employers are looking for and what economics departments focus on in degrees?
- What might be driving any gap?
- What can/should we do?

Approach I: Definition of employability

- *“Higher education should prepare students to get a good graduate level first job and help them develop skills to enable them to succeed at work and in their wider life.”*
- **NOT** interview skills, CV writing etc...

Approach II: Data

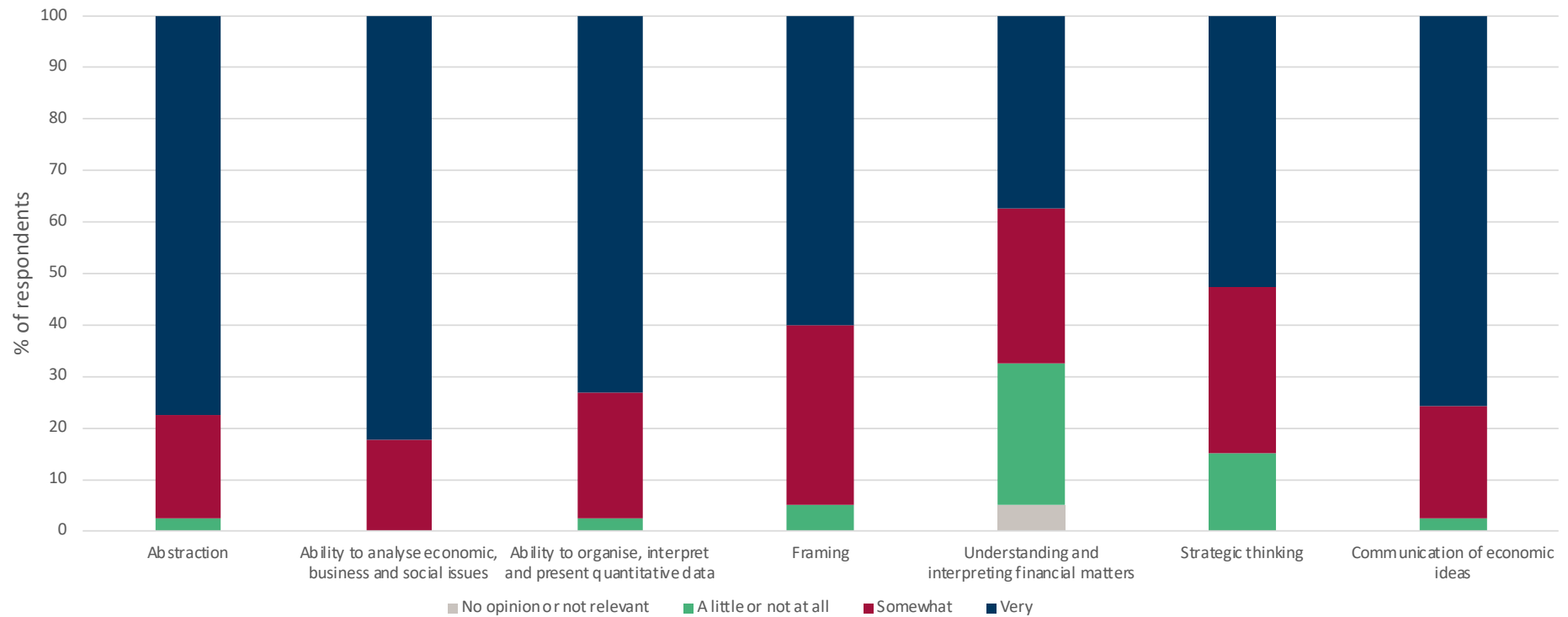
- The Economics Network Employer surveys (2012, 2015, 2019)
 - 40 respondents in most recent survey
- Comprehensive survey of UK economics departments to assess skills priorities of academics
 - 39 respondents with good mix of universities from across the UK
- Focus Groups at UCL and Aston University
 - 18 academics, 9 employer representatives and 9 students between the two groups

Approach III: Potential data issues

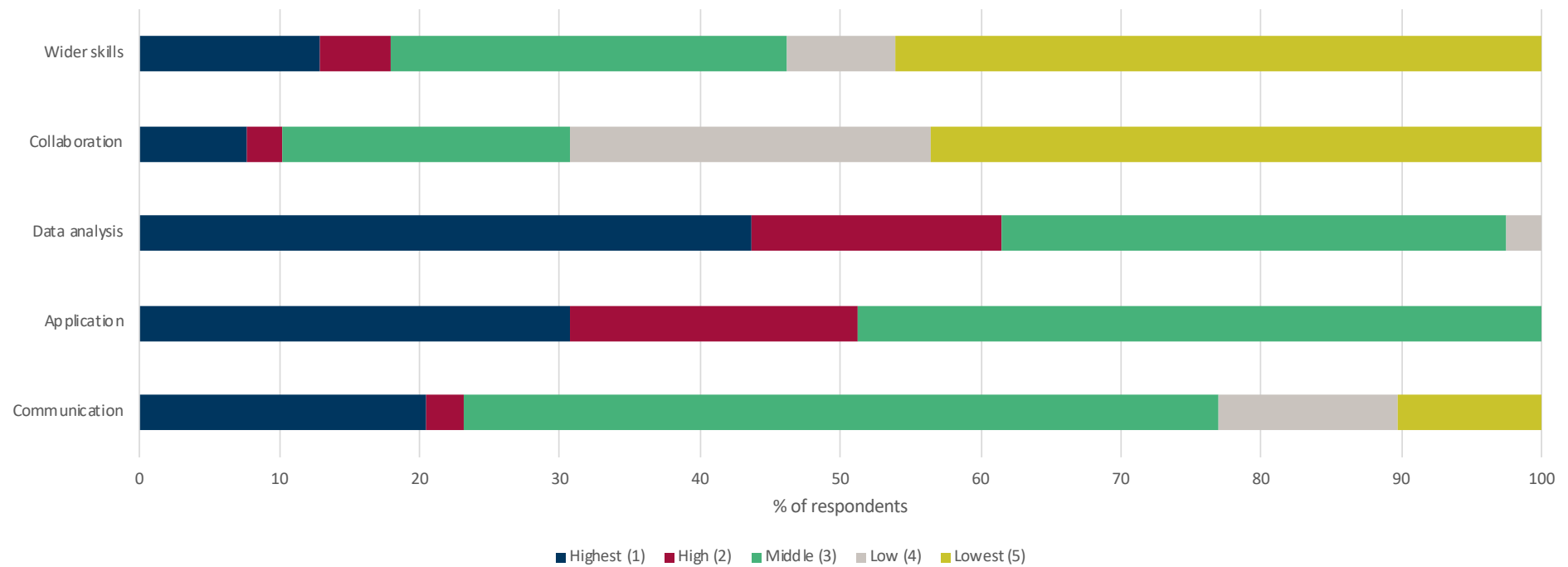
- Selection bias
- Typical hazards of using survey data
- Small sample so lack of formal econometric analysis – but aim is start a conversation rather than write an article for *Econometrica*!

Employer priorities

Which of the following skills do you see as important for economics graduates?



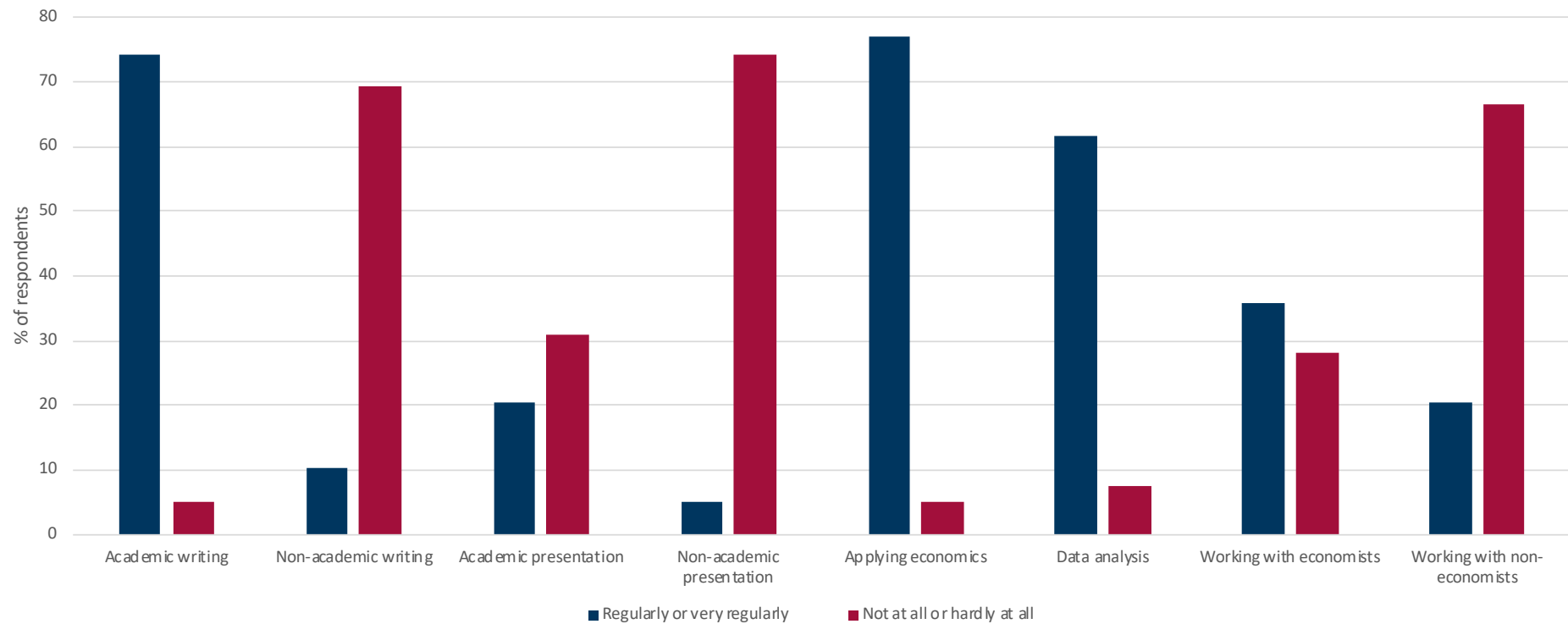
Economics department priorities



* Please note the scaling issues discussed.

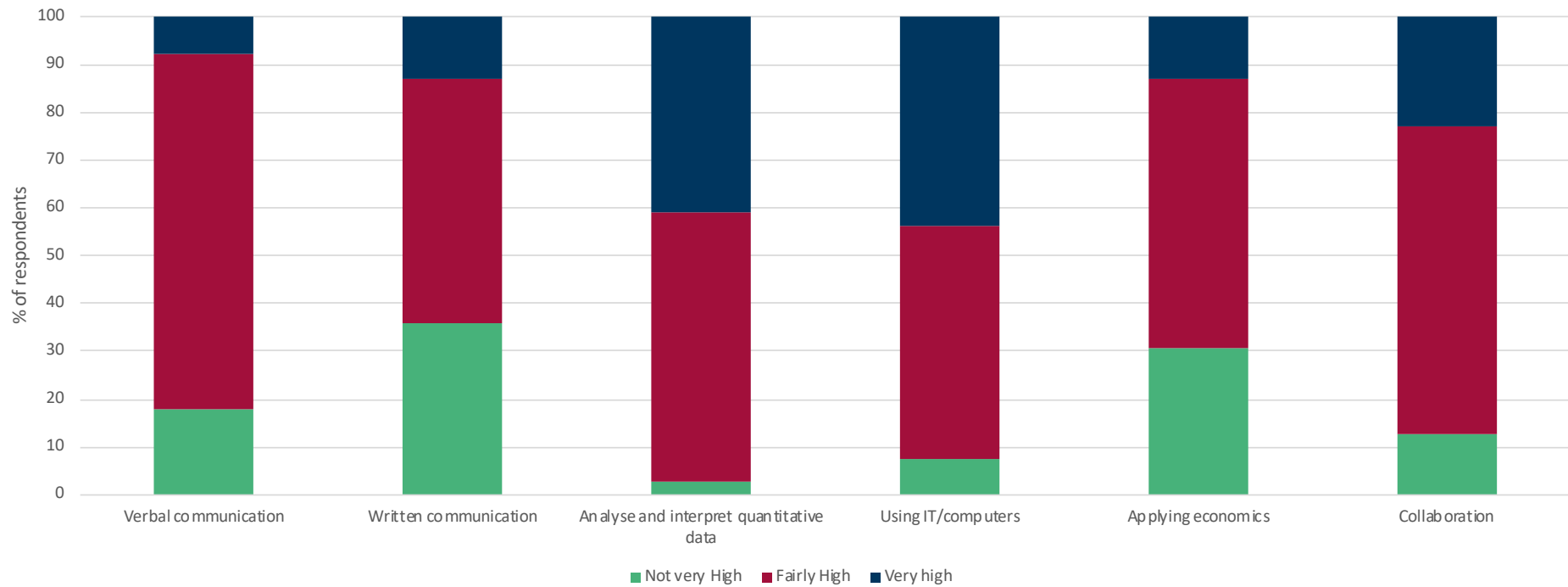
Opportunities to develop skills

How often do students get the opportunity to develop employability skills?



Do graduates have priority skills?

How do you rate the general skills of graduates?



Summarising the gaps

Skill area	Employer priority rank - 1= top priority	Degree priority rank - 1 = top priority	Employer concern about graduate skill
Communication	2	3	HIGH
Application to the real world	1	2	MEDIUM
Data analysis	3	1	LOW
Collaboration	-	5	HIGH
Wider skills	4	4	HIGH

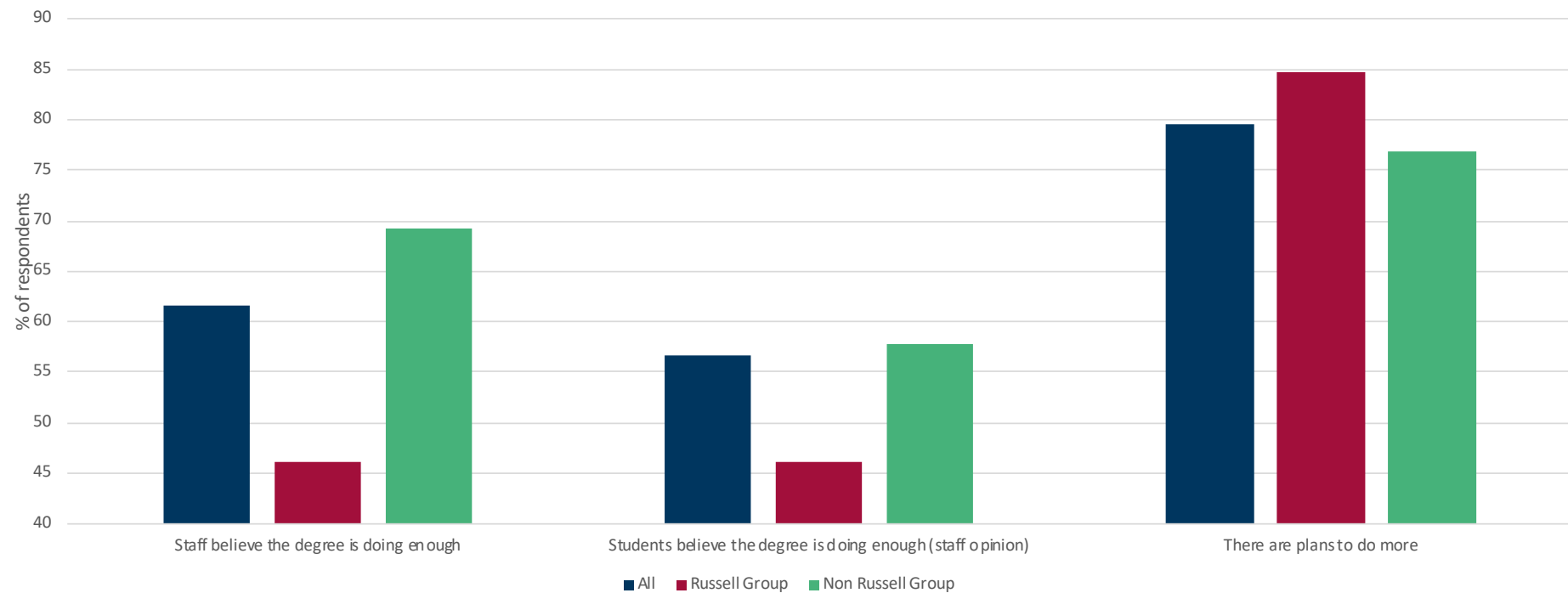
Note: red indicates higher priority/higher concern.

Why might there be a gap?

- Not doing enough and time lags
- Employers and academics may define skills differently
- Teaching and learning activities not effective
- Difficult to get students to engage with opportunities

Are degrees doing enough?

Do departments think they are doing enough?



Speaking at cross purposes?

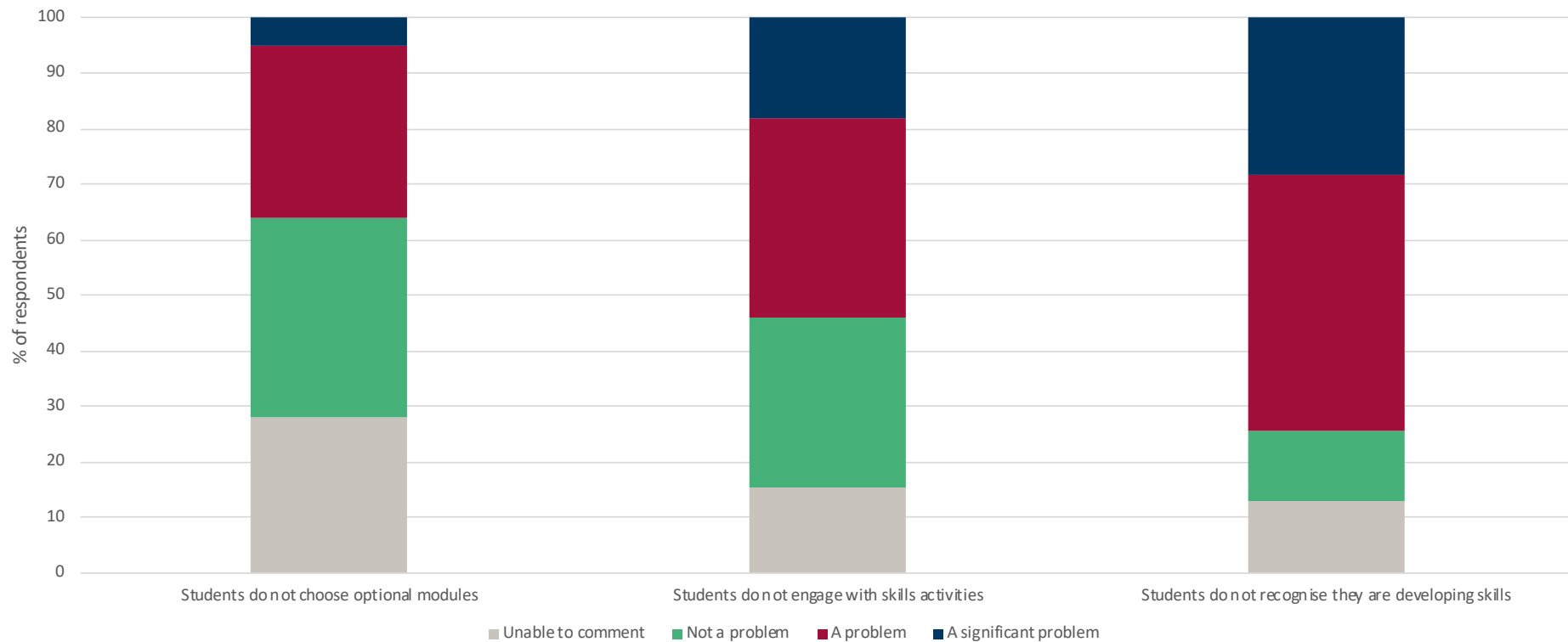
	Employer	Economics Department
Communication	Non-expert audience Written and oral Variety of accessible	Academic Mainly written Traditional essays/dissertations
Application	Solving commercial/policy problems Simplifying complexity to analyse	Connect content to real world examples Limited link to 'on the job'
Data analysis	Practical econometrics Identify, download, clean and organise data Excel Coding Confident learning by doing/self-teaching	Econometrics – theory and practice Given datasets (small) Some Excel Limited coding Teacher-led
Collaboration	Mix of colleagues	Other economists (and limited)
'Soft' skills	Long list	Independent thinking + time management Implicit

Effectiveness of T&L strategies?

- Lots of careers support, led by Department
- Opportunities for placement experiences
- Skills mainly developed in economics modules, alongside content
- Across years of degrees
- Use mix of large group and small group teaching and various types of independent activities

- Much of the good stuff is optional
- Overly focused on academic-related skills
- Are students *learning by doing* in small tutorials and large lectures?
- Are take-home activities and closed-book exams *related to what people do at work and variety of outputs*?
- Handful of people leading the way

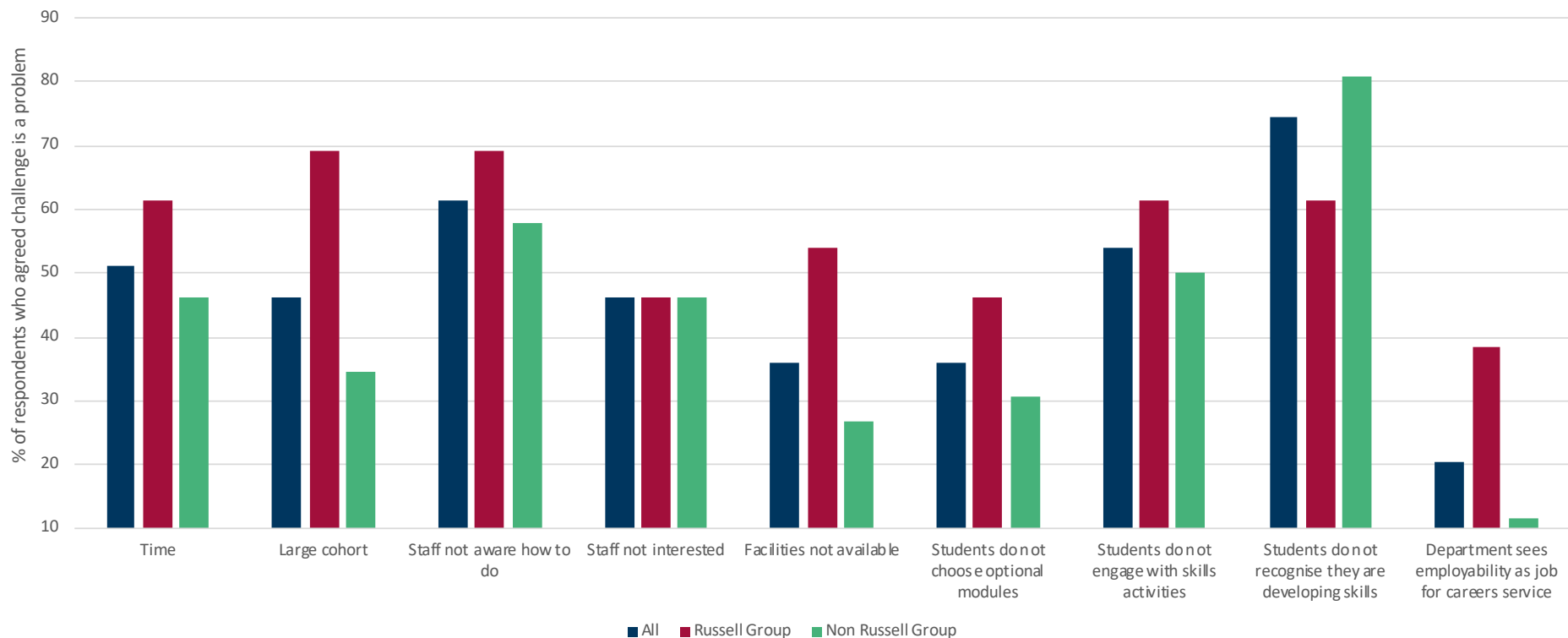
Students not taking the opportunities?



- Opportunities are in compulsory modules – do students see the link to skills?
- Opportunities are assessed – only academic skills? Does skill get you the grade?

Should departments do more/make efforts to change what they are doing?

There are challenges to overcome



Some practical suggestions

Engaging students

EXPLAIN how skills being developed
EXPLAIN why important
Get Employers/Alumni to EXPLAIN
Make sure it really matters for marks
Make them reflect (for marks)

Engaging staff

Whole Department requirement
Reward efforts
KEEP it simple/in their comfort zone
Share resources
Employers/Alumni help design T&L
Collaborate with other disciplines



Feedback/Comments/Questions

We welcome comments on our draft report to cloda.jenkins@ucl.ac.uk

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