

COMMUTER STUDENTS NEEDS REPORT 23/24



CITY
STUDENTS'
UNION

Executive Summary

Being a commuter student is a unique experience for many City students. Up to 80% of City students have previously been recorded as a commuter student: defined as a student who travels between their residence and principal study location.

The SU aims to understand more into this population and their needs in order to make sure services and activity offered are enriching to the commuter student experience and supports them in a way that they need from the SU. The Commuter Students Needs project probes into what commuter student characteristics and behaviours are of City students, their barriers and challenges in participating in the SU, and how commuter students currently utilise and expect to access the SU.

Headline findings in our research into City commuter students from surveys and postcode analysis show

Key trends with student commuter characteristics and behaviours

92%

of City students commute into campus with travel journey times being upwards of 30 minutes to 90 minutes.



Most students reside in London, with areas like East London and North London having higher concentration of City students.

On average, commutes into campus cost students per day

£10.75



In an average week, most students commute between 3 to 4 days to campus.

The unique challenges faced by the average City commuter student



Academic timetabling constraints like long gaps and short teaching days across the week can hugely affect commuter student's needs, impacting student's time and costs related to commuting.

In terms of importance in delivering services and activity in the SU and areas students are most likely to participate in, the top areas include

**Events,
Societies,
Employability**



Serving commuter student needs means pushing for student-friendly timetables, making SU events more accessible and prioritising reducing the cost of living (and commuting).

Introduction

The commuter student experience presents a complicated and pressing picture in the higher education sector. Literature has focused on this group as students taking residency at home with parents or guardians, with recent reports showing increasing numbers of students living at parental homes. **In the case for City's student population, nearly two-thirds of students are recorded to live at home with parents or guardians.**

While it can offer students a share of many advantages, it is well known that the overall educational experience of students choosing to live at home may be less rounded than other students who enjoy a more integrated and immersive academic, social and cultural experience of university. For example, HEPI's 'Homeward Bound' 2018 report highlights **that university is experienced differently for many commuter students** and its impact can be as wide ranging as

- lacking community among peers and academics,
- low out-of-class interactions,
- limited availability to participate in group work environments,
- and the inability to participate fully in extra-curricular opportunities that are typically considered a core part of the traditional university experience.

Gaps that commuter students face in their wider student experience tend to be in areas that align with the operational goals of the students' union services. This highlights that enhancing SU services to ensure that the Union is serving commuter students is a priority concern in addressing these gaps. In response to the large commuter student population at City and the unique challenges they face, this commuter students' needs research provides further insight into the experiences of commuter students in order to identify their needs and remove barriers that may hinder a more engaging student experience.

The Union aims to understand the following research objectives:

1. What are the barriers to engagement with the Students' Union for commuter students?
2. What services do commuter students need from the Students' Union?
3. How do students want the Students' Union to improve its offer to ensure they can access support when they need it?

Previous research into the commuter student in City's Student University of Choice 2019 paper shows that **80% of City students are recognised as commuter students** who travel between their residence and principal study location. Currently, there is limited systematic data to flag commuter students at City, therefore limiting the use of trends into this population. In this report, our extensive secondary research includes background research into the national commuter student landscape and postcode profile mapping of City student's term-time locality from registration data available to the SU. The SU additionally ran a commuter student survey during term 2 to explore commuting behaviours and needs for SU services and activity.

Background

Definitions

The sector definition of a commuter student varies across institutions and regions, and ultimately characterises who commuter students are. It is useful to know other institutionally used definitions in order to understand the multiple factors that may determine a commuter student i.e. living in parental homes, travel distance between home and study zones, length and time of commute, or travel between transport zones. Other considerations of what constitutes a commuter student can be determined by whether universities are rural campus-based or city-based.

Overall, a commuter student generally refers to the student who often must travel a distance from their place of residence to their place of study. Examples of other institutional definitions include the following:

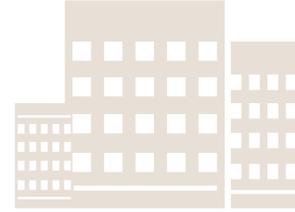
- City, University of London agree that commuter students are students for whom the **travel between their residence and principal study** location materially affects their ability to succeed in higher education.
- University College London uses the combination of total **time travelled to campus and transport zones** through Transport for London as an indicator of a commuter student.
- Brunel University of London refers to commuter students as anyone with the **same term time address and home address**.
- University of Bristol on the other hand, views commuter students as those who **do not live in student accommodations** or the city of Bristol.

Key challenges of commuter students

The main challenges commuter students may have in their student experience has been found in extensive sector literature that similarly resonates with City students based on our research:

Shortage of university nominated halls

Due to the shortage of affordable student accommodation options near campus, students may not be able to secure halls residency and have to consider commuting options. This can limit the choice to staying at home or finding more affordable housing further from campus locality.



Student-unfriendly timetables

Challenges around timetabling can be fundamental to commuter student's overall experience. Compulsory teaching timetables that persist with long gaps in the days and disproportionately weighted teaching days spread across the week can negatively impact student's commuting needs and part-time work hours as well as increase travel and food costs. As a result, students may base module selection around their timetabling needs.

Cost of living and commuting

Commuting can be attached to financial burdens on students including increasing fare costs on public transport, off peak and peak travelling and high food costs on and off campus. A lack of affordable food options on campus may discourage students from nourishing themselves. Other costs that may be linked to having to commute more than expected can affect student's part-time work availability and income, and arrangements for childcare.



Community and Wellbeing

Travel for longer periods of times can be physically and mentally strenuous. Additional barriers during commute may be faced by students with disabilities. Facilities on campus may often not cater to commuting students who may require additional spaces to rest and store equipment and belongings. There can also be a lower sense of community and identification with university among commuter students compared student's living in halls.

Time poor

Due to traveling constraints and time commitments outside of university, student's availability of staying on campus may be limited and there may be a preference for activity taking place earlier in the day to avoid later journeys.



Findings

This section compiles an analysis of both primary and secondary data collected on commuter students from City, University of London. This includes:

- Profile maps of the student's term-time locality recorded at registration
- Results from the SU Commuter students survey of 619 respondents

Postcode Profile Mapping

Using student term-time postcode data of all City students irrespective of mode of study, at a regional level, nearly three-quarters of current City students reside in London during term time. While significantly fewer in numbers, students are recorded as living as far as the Midlands region, Wales, Scotland and Northern Island during term-time.

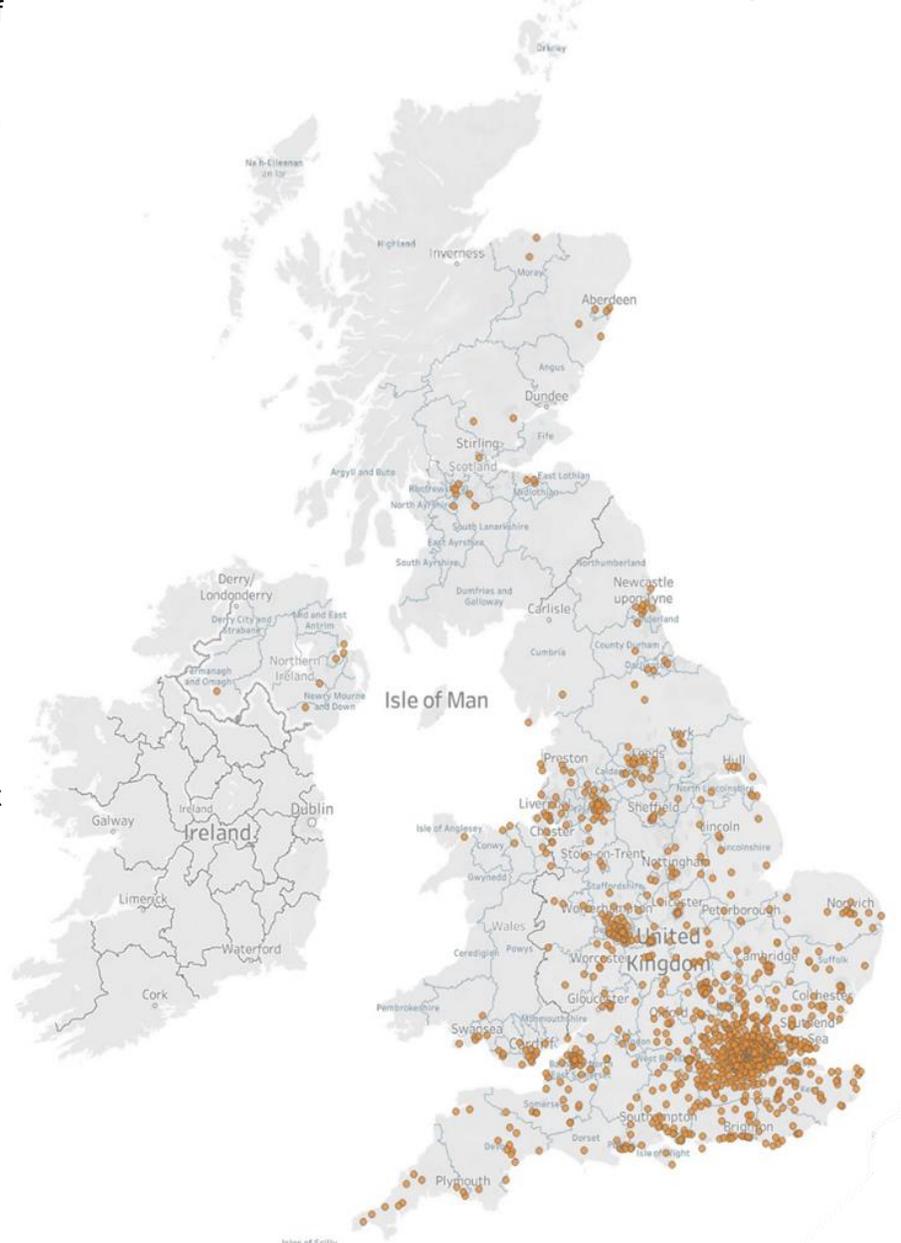
Further mapping analysis into the London region area provides a breakdown of students by postcode districts layer, showing the top 3 areas City students are commuting from are

- **East London** followed by
- **North London** and
- **Eastern-Central London.**

While available data wasn't sufficient for borough locality of students, postcode districts provides the closest zone area students are commuting from.

A final layer of mapping profiles students by postcode boundaries within London. Being the highest concentration of student addresses, postcode analysis specific to London compared to all other regions explores term-time residence local to City's London campuses. Postcode boundaries within inner-London postcode districts are plotted on Map 3.

Map 1: National map of student term-time locality.

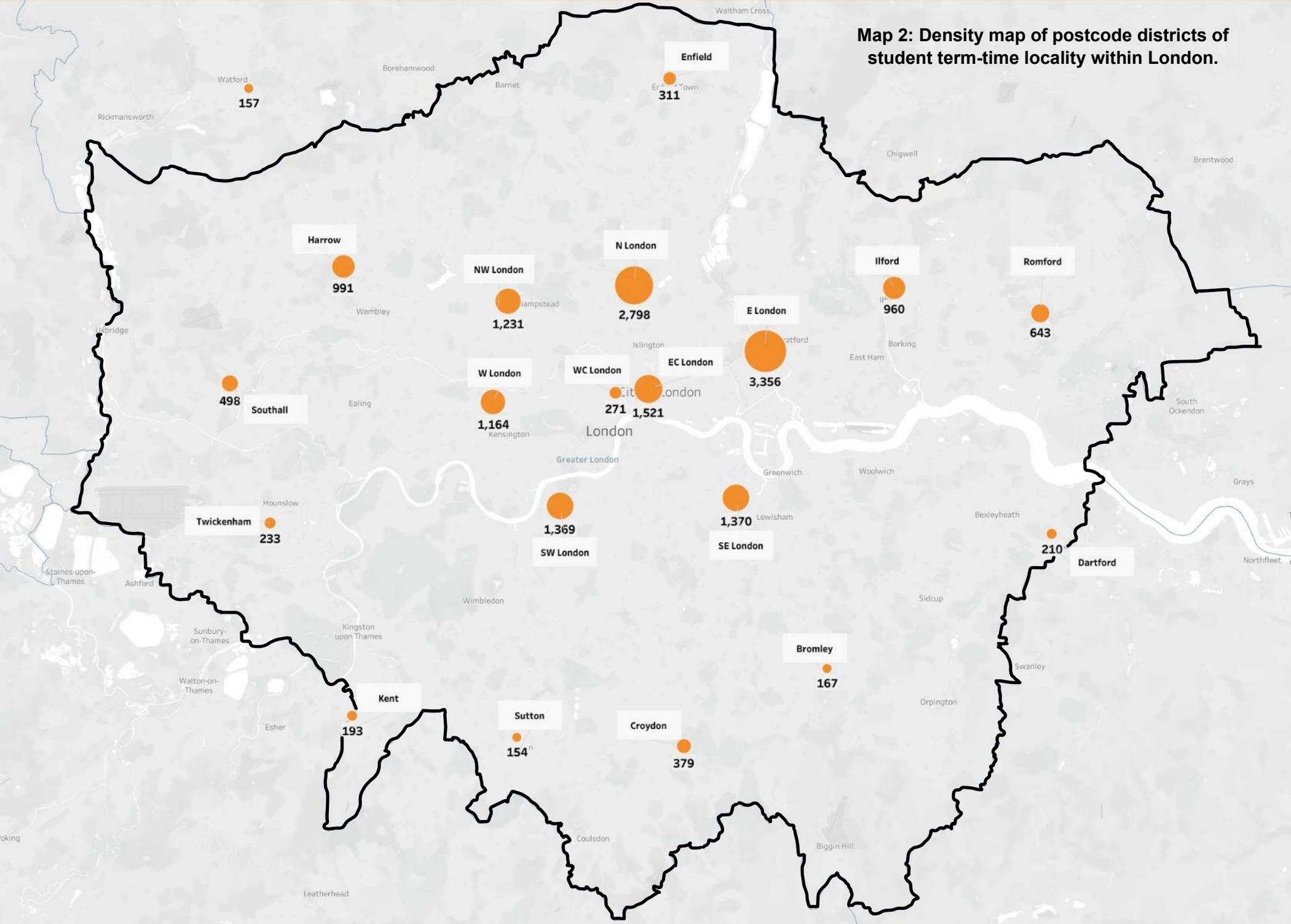


Postcode districts key

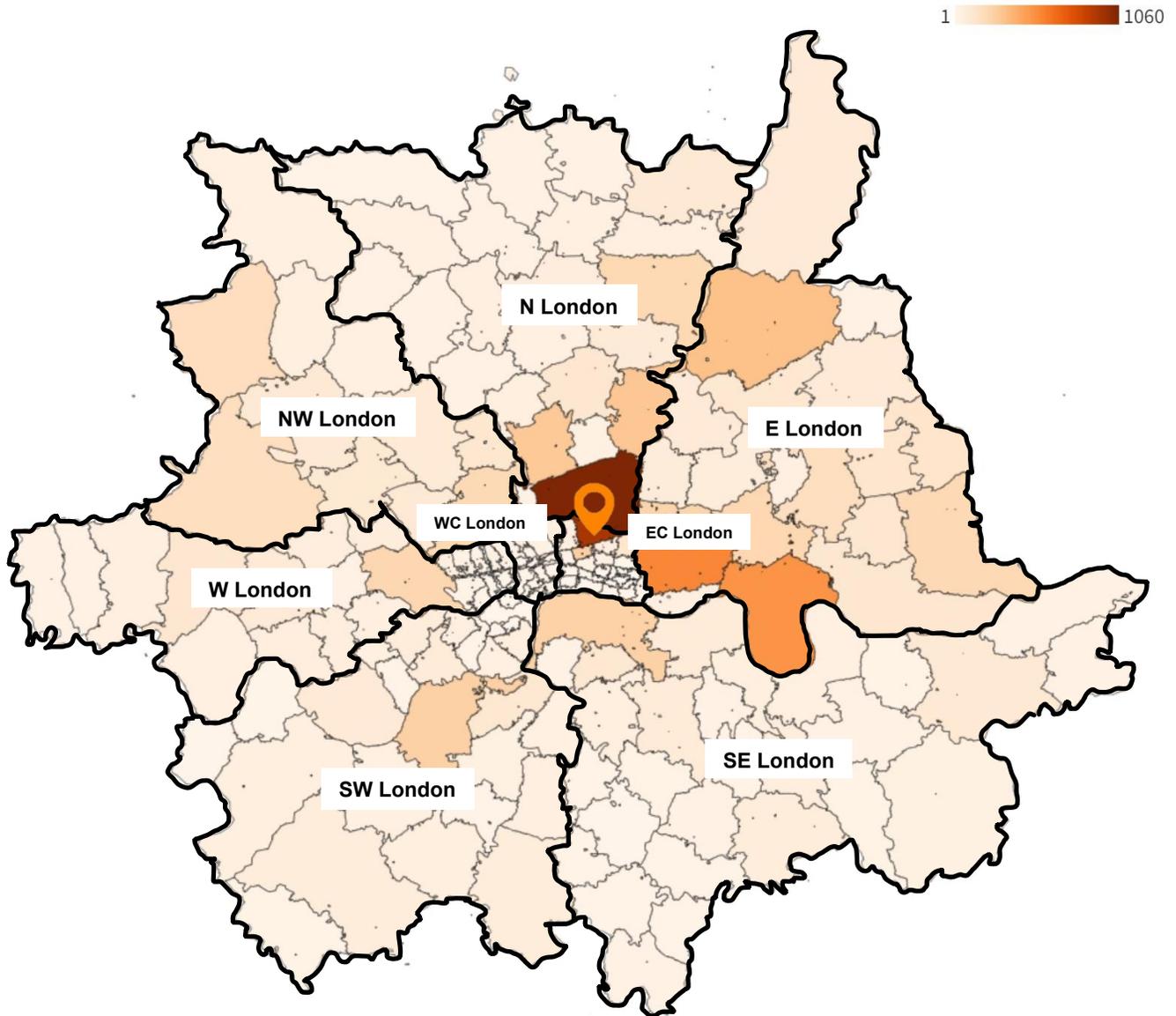
Inner London: North London (N London), North-West London (NW London), East London (E London), Eastern-Central London (EC London), South-East London (SE London), South-West London (SW London), West London (W London), Western-Central London (WC London).

Outer London: Harrow, Southall, Watford, Enfield, Ilford, Romford, Dartford, Bromley, Croydon, Sutton, Kent, Twickenham.

Map 2: Density map of postcode districts of student term-time locality within London.



Map 3: Heatmap of student term-time locality within inner-London postcode districts.



- Nearly three-quarters of students are based in London, including within inner-London districts, the highest number of students residing in East London and North London.
- The single highest postcode area (N1) falls within North London with over 1000 students residing. The second highest single postcode area of student addresses (EC1V) falls in Eastern-Central London, closest to City's main campus with over 900 students living in this locality. Both postcode districts fall across Islington, Hackney and Camden boroughs.
- Other postcode areas with high numbers of students residing generally fall in East London including in the Tower Hamlets, Newham and Waltham Forest boroughs as well as North-West London including boroughs of Camden and Brent.
- Generally, within London there are larger populations of students living in closer proximity to City University's postcode than further out.

Commuter Student Survey

The SU conducted a commuter student survey in term 2 during March 2024 with a total of 619 students responding to the survey. This section explores the survey analysis, providing insight into commuting behaviours, campus activity, and engagement and utilisation of SU services.

The following research questions were explored to understand the commuter student experience and needs better:

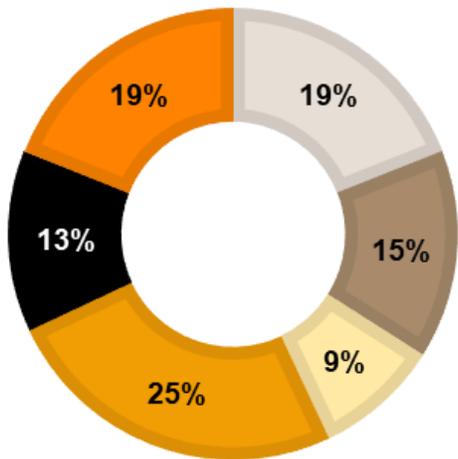
- What are the barriers to engagement with the Students' Union for commuter students?
- What services do commuter students need from the Students' Union?
- How do students want the Students' Union to improve its offer to ensure they can access support when they need it?

Demographics

A demographic breakdown of survey responses is presented below including schools, year and level of study, and domicile.

619 responses in the survey

School

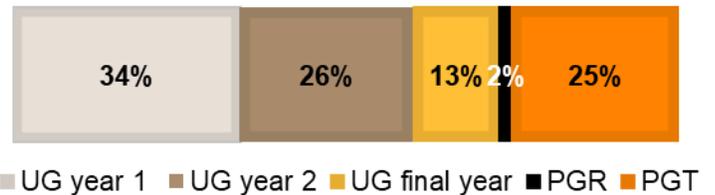


■ Bayes ■ CLS ■ SCC ■ SHPS ■ SPGA ■ SST

25% of responses were from students in School of Health & Psychological Sciences (SHPS), followed by 19% from Bayes Business School (Bayes), 19% from School of Science & Technology (SST), 15% from City Law School (CLS), 13% from School of Policy & Global Affairs (SPGA), and 9% from School of Communication & Creativity (SCC).

Most students who completed the commuter survey were in their undergraduate level of study with a third of responses in the first year (34%) and a quarter in the second year (26%).

Level and year of study



■ UG year 1 ■ UG year 2 ■ UG final year ■ PGR ■ PGT

Domicile



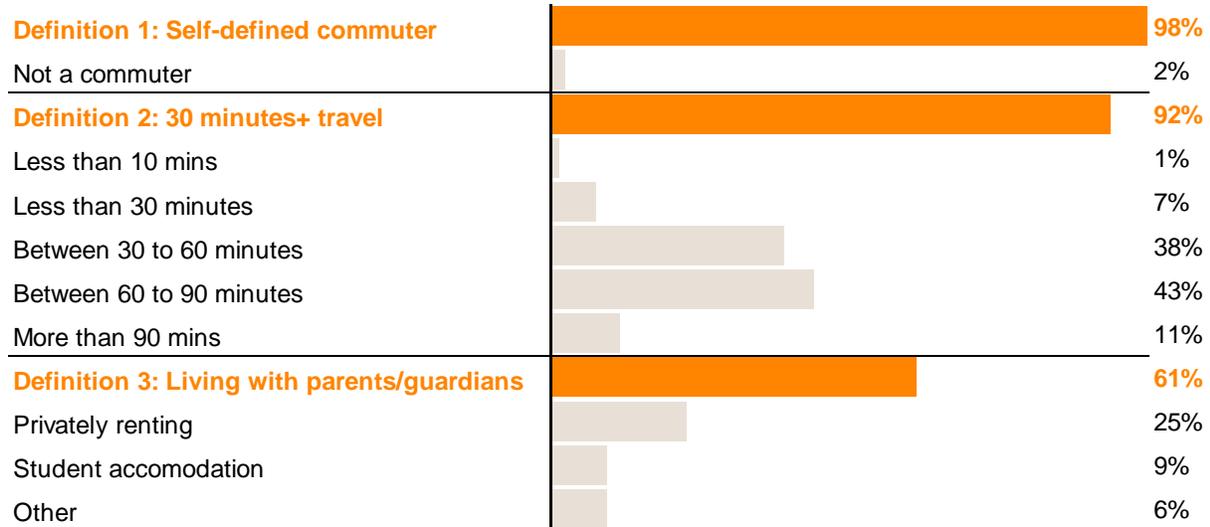
■ Home ■ International

Commuting behaviours

A large number of City students can relate to being a commuter while studying. There are different measures and characteristics of commuter students reported in the survey:

- **98%** of students **self-define** themselves as a commuter student
- **92%** of students have a **journey time of more than 30 minutes** when commuting to campus
- **61%** of students reported they are **living with parents or guardians** while studying.

Graph 1: Percentage of commuter students by definitions



92% of City students commute into campus with **travel journey times being upwards of 30 minutes to 90 minutes.**

The commonly adopted definition of a traditional commuter student as living at home can overlook those students who may not be in this category but are still required to travel to university at a distance. In light of these differences, an acceptable definition of a commuter student is a student's journey time into the main campus. Our findings define commuter students as **a student who travels more than 30 minutes from their home to campus.**

On average, travel time to commute to campus can range between half an hour to an hour. The bulk of students (43%) reported that their commute time is between an hour and one and a half hours.

Students who are living in student accommodation are the most likely to have shorter commute times to campus under 30 minutes. Over half (57%) of hall students have a commute of more than 30 minutes compared to 99% of students who live at home and 88% of students privately renting. The survey data captured no hall students who are commuting more than 90 minutes while 11% of students living in all other living arrangements reported journeys over one and a half hours to campus.

More than two-thirds of students reported on average they commute between 3 to 4 days to campus.

Most students (42%) highlighted they commute 4 days to campus in an average week for academic, social, and extra-curricular activity, followed by 27% of students usually commuting 3 days a week. A marginal number of students reported commuting to campus for a minimum of 1 day or a maximum of 6 to 7 days.

The below tables reflect breakdowns in the weekly commute by school and level of study. There are differences in how the number of commuting days is dispersed within schools while for some schools the majority of students commute to campus on average 4 days in the week. For example, students from SHPS are more likely than other schools to commute to campus 1 or 2 days while students from SCC are more likely to be on campus for up to 7 days a week compared to other schools.

Graph 2: Weekly commute by school

	1 day	2 days	3 days	4 days	5 days	6-7 days
Average	3%	11%	27%	42%	16%	1%
Bayes	3%	11%	30%	35%	20%	1%
CLS	1%	5%	16%	72%	5%	1%
SCC	4%	7%	28%	35%	21%	5%
SHPS	5%	22%	24%	35%	13%	1%
SPGA	0%	9%	30%	53%	8%	0%
SST	2%	5%	33%	34%	26%	0%

Students at the undergraduate level are more likely to commute to campus for 4 days a week than postgraduate students. Patterns of commuting 4 or more days a week into campus are also higher for undergraduate students in their first and second years compared to final-year students of who most are more likely to have a split between 3 to 4 days.

Graph 3: Weekly commute by level of study¹

	1 day	2 days	3 days	4 days	5 days	6-7 days
UG year 1	1%	7%	24%	51%	17%	0%
UG year 2	0%	8%	25%	50%	15%	2%
UG year 3	1%	12%	38%	34%	12%	1%
PGT*	4%	17%	29%	34%	15%	1%

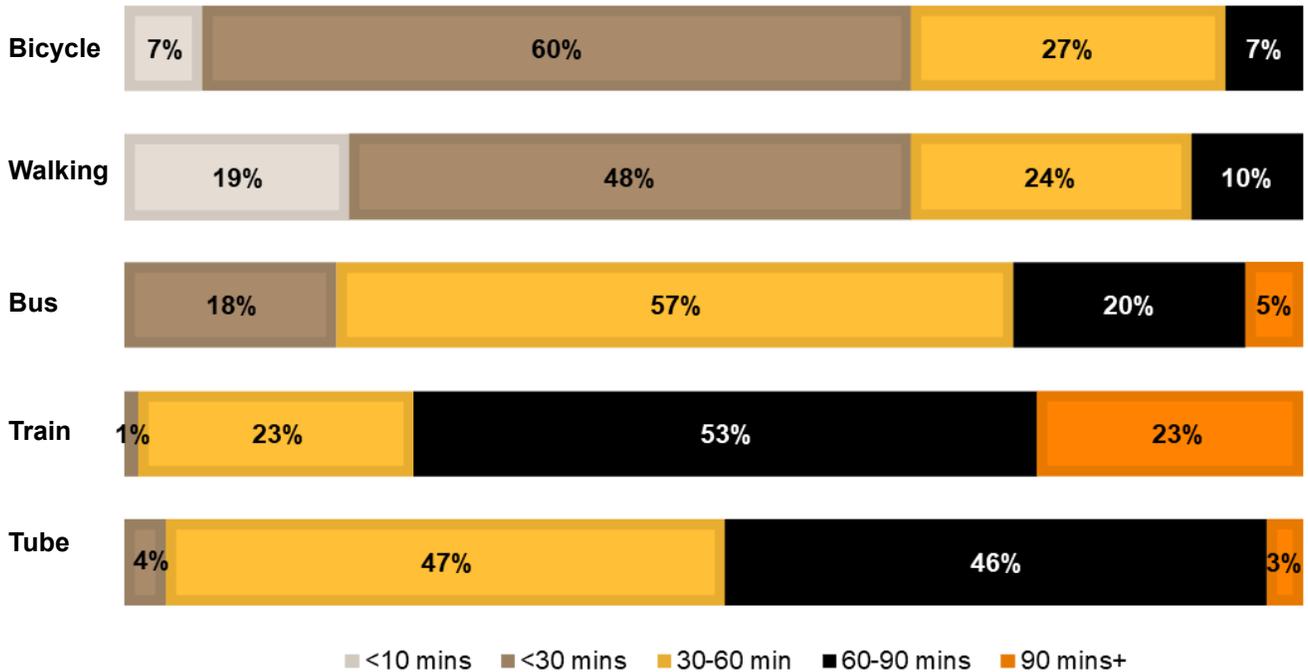
The data shows that the average of commuting to campus of 4 or more days a week is slightly higher for some groups than others. For example, female students, international students and students living in student accommodation are more likely to commute to campus for 4 or more days compared to others..

¹ The response rate for this question for Postgraduate research students were below 10 therefore unreported.

81% of students use Tube or Train as their main mode of transport to commute to campus.

There is a clear pattern of journey time increasing when public transport modes are used by students. Travel times using the top 5 modes of transport to commute to campus are shown in the below graph, with the tube being the most used transport to commute into campus by 43% of students, followed by trains used by 41% of students, bus used by 10% students, and 4% of students walk to campus and 1% cycle.

Graph 4: Commute time by mode of transport



Generally, students who walk or cycle to campus have shorter journey times of under 30 minutes than those who use public transport in their commute. A third of students who walk or cycle to campus have commute times of over 30 minutes up to 90 minutes.

Contrastingly, nearly all students who use trains or tubes as transportation have a journey time of 30 minutes up to 90 minutes plus, suggesting commuter students are most likely to use public transport modes that generally have longer travel times. Students who use the tube are more likely to have journeys of up to an hour compared to students who use the train who are most likely to have journeys upwards of an hour to 90 minutes plus.

On average, students spend approximately
£10.75
daily on travel into campus.

On average, students have daily travel costs of £10.75 on commuting days. Our survey recorded a minimum value of 20p per daily commute (including all transport modes except walking), up to a maximum total of £78 per day to commute to campus. 48% of students spend over £10 a day per commute including 4% of students having daily commute costs of over £30.

Campus activity and engagement

Over $\frac{1}{2}$ of students can spend between 2 to 5 hours in a day on campus in the average week.

The survey explored what commuter student's campus activity looks like including how long students generally stay on campus and what their main activity is when on campus. The bulk of students (74%) can spend between 2 and 7 hours on campus in a day while 20% of students stated that the amount of time spent on campus per day in the week can vary from a minimum of 1 hour to over 10 hours in a day.

The amount of time spent daily on campus is mostly similar across all schools, with the majority of students spending between 2 and 5 hours a day on campus. Students from SPGA are more likely to spend up to 3 hours when on campus compared to students from SHPS of whom over half can spend 4 to 7 hours a day when on campus. In comparison to all other schools, students from SCC had the highest number of students reporting staying on campus for more than 8 hours at a time.

Graph 5: Hours on campus by school

	1 hour	2-3 hours	4-5 hours	6-7 hours	8 hours+	It can vary across the week
Average	1%	25%	30%	19%	6%	20%
Bayes	1%	29%	33%	15%	4%	18%
CLS	1%	27%	31%	16%	1%	23%
SCC	0%	23%	34%	16%	14%	13%
SHPS	1%	19%	26%	26%	8%	20%
SPGA	1%	43%	26%	5%	4%	21%
SST	1%	17%	31%	24%	6%	21%

Generally, second year undergraduate students are more likely to stay longer on campus compared to all other years and levels. Length of stay on campus across an average week varies more for third year students in undergraduate levels, with students in this year and level being more likely to stay shorter on campus.

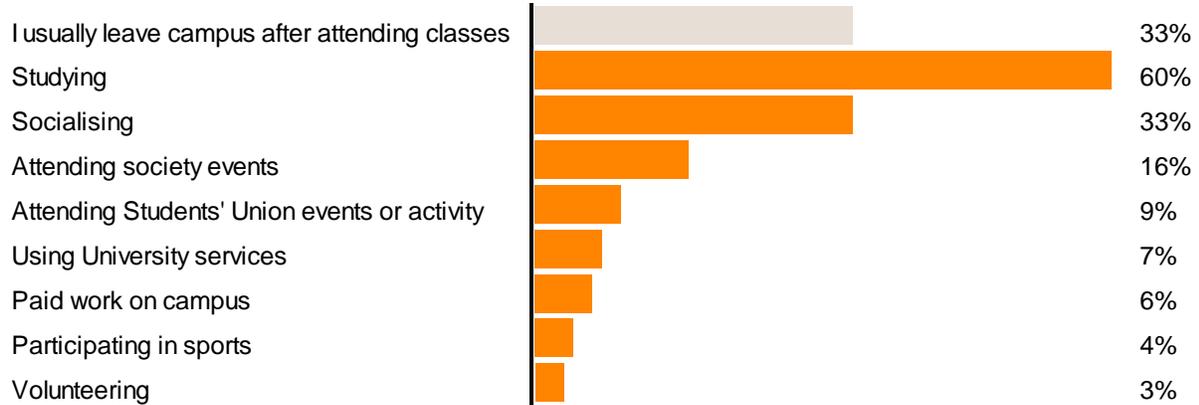
Graph 6: Hours on campus by level of study

	1 hour	2-3 hours	4-5 hours	6-7 hours	8 hours+	It can vary across the week
UG year 1	1%	17%	31%	31%	10%	10%
UG year 2	0%	0%	27%	33%	27%	13%
UG year 3	1%	29%	30%	14%	3%	22%

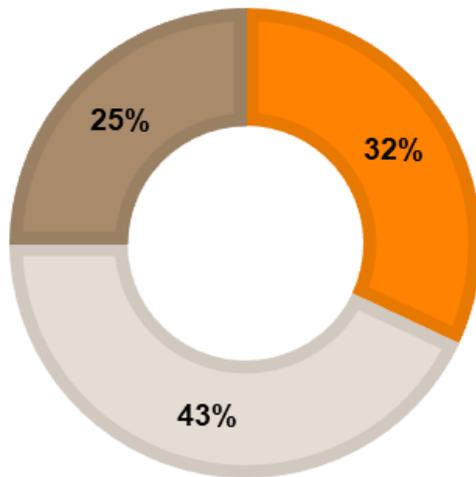
What are students doing on campus? Students who are commuters usually spend their time on campus to study (60%), followed by non-timetabled activity like socialising (33%) and attending events (25%). A third of students reported they only attend campus for classes, leaving right after. Other activities students also mentioned included working or volunteering on campus,

participating in sports, attending course-related events or meetings or independently engaging in hobbies.

Graph 7: Types of activity on campus



Level of community



■ Positive ■ Unsure ■ Negative

Levels of community are generally low for commuter students irrespective of time spent on campus. 32% of commuter students identified as being part of the community, which is significantly lower than previously recorded metrics (78% from 2023/24 Check-Ins) while the majority of 43% were unsure.

Community and belonging in terms of being a commuter student can be said to be lower than community in general as a City student, indicating that commuter students may resonate less with the community at City.

Current barriers to participation in the SU

Students shared their main challenges with participating across SU activity and services. Similar to existing research, commuter students reported the following barriers relating to their commuter needs.

- 1 Time sensitivity:** One of the most common barriers students may face in engaging with the SU while on campus is the timing of SU events and activity, which usually is scheduled later in the day, may clash with lectures and seminars or take place on days students aren't already on campus. While also factoring in the fatigue that long commute journeys can have on student's energy to join in, students may have to primarily consider their journey back home when participating in events including worries around delays, avoiding peak hours and safety.
- 2 Financial costs of commute:** Avoiding peak hours for already long distance travel can determine student's decision to stay on campus and take part in activity. Students also mention it is unlikely they would participate in activity or access the SU outside of their scheduled commute days to campus. This is mainly motivated by costs and time required to exclusively commute for non-teaching activities.
- 3 SU advertisement:** Many students report that they are generally not aware of what the SU offers in terms of events and services, which may be due to lack of receiving communications and engaging with existing communications.
- 4 Academic and work commitment:** Students will tend to prioritise academic workload and choose to study over social and extra-curricular activity. This is a similar priority for needing to undertake paid work over participation.
- 5 Low community and social anxiety:** A disconnect from the City community can discourage students from meeting new people and engaging in activities run by the SU, with students highlighting that going alone or not having anyone to go with being a daunting experience.
- 6 Lack of interest and motivation:** Current activity offered simply may not appeal to student's overall interests and interest of associating with the SU.
- 7 Caring responsibilities:** Especially for mature students, caring responsibilities that students may have takes priority over participating in SU activity which may not allow them to stay behind on campus.

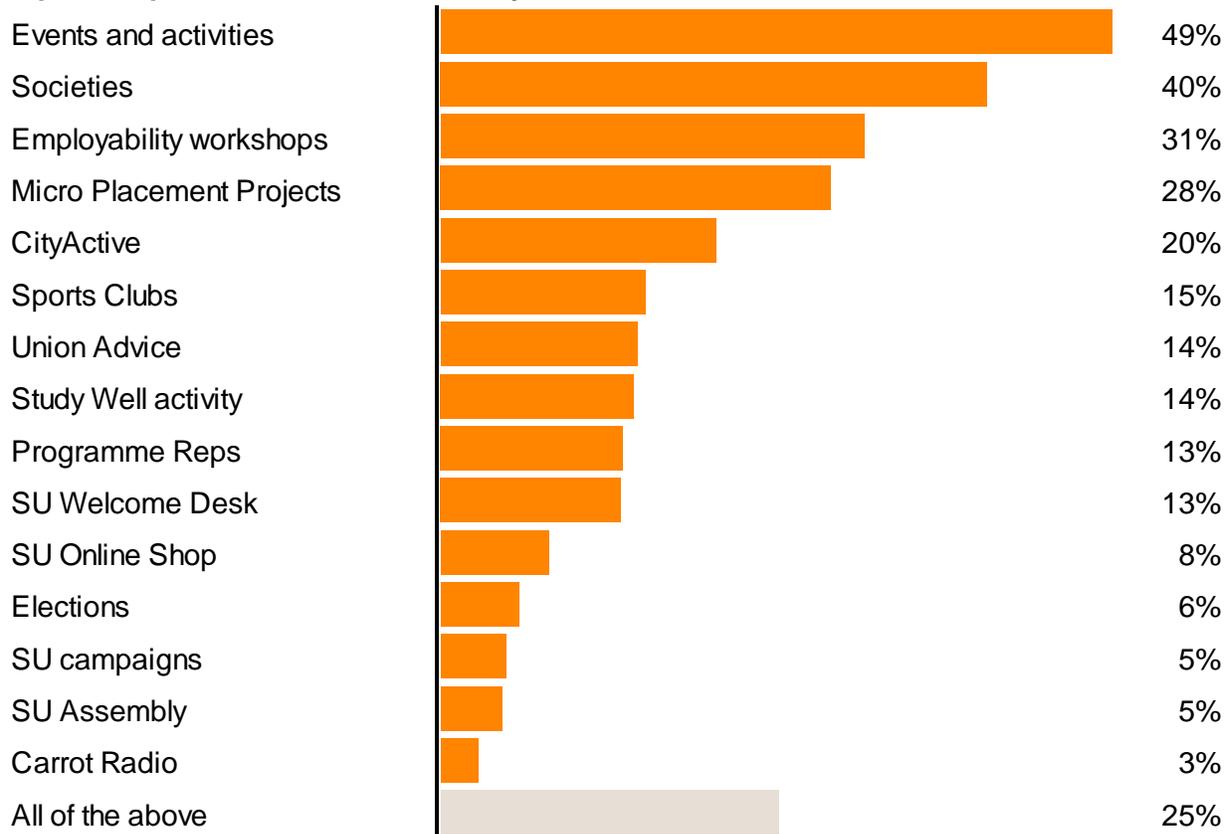
SU service utilisation

A needs assessment of which services currently offered by the SU align with student expectations and are seen as relevant for commuter students was additionally explored in order to identify which services and activities students want the SU to be delivering.

The top areas students expressed as important for the SU to be delivering includes:

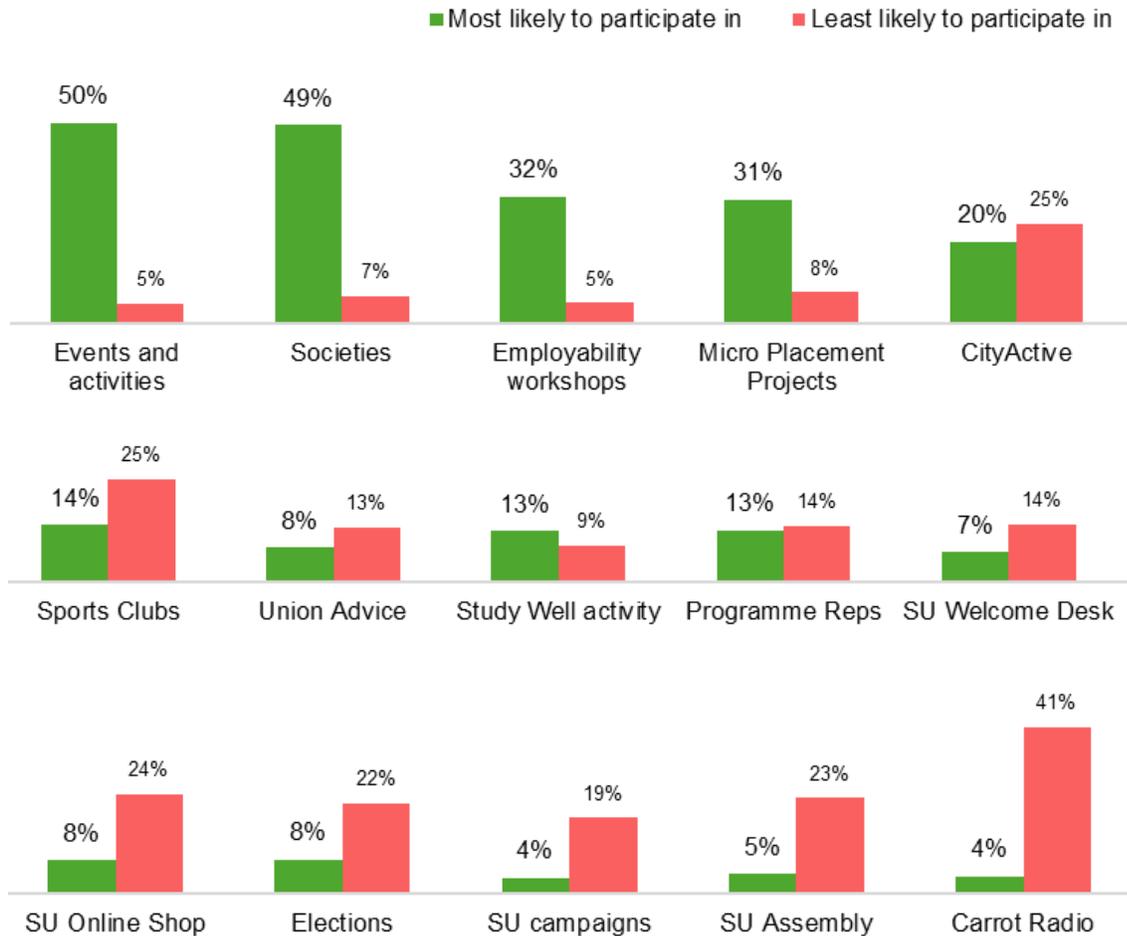
- **Events and activities**
- **Societies**
- **Employability related activity**
- **Sports**

Graph 8: Important areas of SU activity ranked



These high importance areas identify what students expect the SU to deliver that is most aligned to their needs as well as highlighting areas that are the SU currently deliver that are of low importance to commuter students. Most students attached importance to the SU delivering events and activities, followed by societies and providing employability workshops, while 1 in 4 students expressed all above areas of current SU delivery are important to continually provide to students. Current provisions run by the SU including student media, SU Assembly and SU campaigns were the least likely to be seen as important for the SU to be delivering.

Types of SU activity most and least likely to participate in or access



There are areas of SU delivery that are more likely to have higher participation from students than others. Similar to what students attached as important areas for the SU to deliver for commuter students, events, societies, employability related activity and sports similarly were areas that students would most participate in compared to others. The above graphs show individual areas students would most likely participate in within the SU in order of highest to least likely.

Half of students in the survey responded that they are most likely to attend SU-led events and activities and society related events, and a third of students responded that they're most likely to attend employability workshops and the MPP offer. Contrastingly, a quarter of students selected they are least likely to participate or get involved within the SU in areas such as the SU Online shop, student voice areas including elections, campaigns and the Assembly. Most starkly, nearly half of students reported that they are unlikely to ever get involved with student media within the SU like carrot radio.

The main reasons for why many students are unlikely to participate in specific areas within the SU comes down to not knowing enough about the offer from the SU and unsure on how students can get involved. For example, the main reason students found Advice an area of the SU least likely to access is due to not knowing the relevance it may provide students, similar to Study Well activity also having low awareness about the programme among students.

Another common reason why students are unlikely to get involved is a lack of interest in the area provided by the SU. For example, students felt they're least likely to participate in student voice activity within the SU such as elections and the Assembly as there is not enough appeal to them or a strong sense of belonging in the community to participate, as well as a feeling that these may not have a direct impact on students individually. Similarly, there is less appeal to commuter students in joining in CitySport activity due to sports and fitness generally not being an interest to some students and the choice of sports activity closer to home.

Other reasons students may choose to not participate in the current SU offer can be due to focusing on their social life outside of City and generally feeling not part of a community at City to get involved in new activity, especially post-graduate and mature students.

1 in 4 students felt the offer from the SU is incomplete for commuter students.

The final section explores student suggestions for how the commuter experience can be improved by the SU and better geared towards commuter students needs.

Consistent throughout the report is that students main barrier to enjoying the full student experience, and services and activity provided by the SU, is their limited control for time. This includes how much time is available to commuter students after travelling and scheduled timetabling once on campus.

The leading area of support that students feel the SU should be providing to commuter students includes **representing students for more student-friendly timetables** that cater to student's commuting needs. This includes pushing for more condensed timetables across the week that address long gaps in teaching days as well as reducing the number of teaching days in the week. Timetables should embed core teaching hours so that students can make use out of non-teaching activity and events held outside of these times while on campus, as well as introducing core teaching time to avoid peak travel hours.

Other ways students felt the SU can enhance its services towards commuter students includes the following areas:

Cost of Living and travel support

- Focusing on increasing access to travel expense bursaries for all students as well as exploring incentives to participate in SU activity such as covering travel expenses.
- Providing food discounts and free food provisions on campus including breakfast for early commuters and tea and coffee provisions.
- Providing cost of living support including promoting discounts on travel and hotels/accommodation, as well as informing students on ways students can reduce their costs.
- Organising free university run transport links via buses from main stations to campus.
- Promoting rental bike schemes and facilities on campus for students to access and use affordable bikes on their commutes.

More accessible events

- Running SU and society events at earlier times in the day and avoiding peak travel times.
- Making events more accessible outside of core lecture hours and also catering to days students have to commute to campus. In the event of clashes, recurring events throughout the week or longer event times can offer more time options for students to participate.
- Promoting well advertised events that give students enough notice to plan ahead of attending. Other suggestions for more accessible events includes increasing collaboration with societies as well as running events that are appealing for students to attend alone.

Designated spaces for commuters

- Increasing space provisions with amenities like common rooms and nap rooms for students to replenish themselves, as well as spaces like additional prayer rooms that students may travel outside campus to access.
- Entertainment spaces for students to use and network during longer days on campus between breaks.

Community building

- Creating ways to build community among commuter students and communities based on student's existing networks relating to their areas to help integrate into campus life.
- Creating more accessible ways students can get involved with sports on campus and promoting a sports identity of City.

Tailored communications

- Utilizing different SU communications and social media platforms to students to increase promotion of its support, services and activity offered to commuter students. In addition to emails, exploring a mix of online and in person communications with students who are on campus such as using posters, lecture shout outs and engagement stalls.
- Accessing the SU services virtually is a key component of the commuter student experience with the SU for when they are remote from campus, with suggestions for live chats for a more accessible experience when requiring SU services or information.
- More targeted communications relating to travel such as discounts and train strikes or closures is useful to share among commuter students.