



Living and lifestyle: the student perspective

Research commissioned and led by
the Students' Union Research Group

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Introduction

Introduction

At regular intervals a group of UK Students' Unions comes together to design, fund and commission research into students' views and experience of university. Previously Students' Unions have looked at the student view of teaching excellence, and student perceptions of value for money. This time around a group has come together to learn more about a number of student living and lifestyle issues.

Every year a raft of research is released on crucial student issues relating to housing, costs and travel, but much of it is characterised by a commissioning organisation with an agenda and a pre-packed press release, which gathers low response rates. We wanted to know more about these issues; not to promote a new product, service or app, but to determine whether both national and institutional policy needs to change in these areas.

The results of the study are stark. Around one in five students across the UK are unhappy with their accommodation, and some 30% would change their choice if they could. Many universities have been expanding rapidly in recent years, but it is not at all clear that enough thought has been given to where students will live – prices are rising, and accommodation is often a problematic distance from campus. Given that housing costs account for the bulk of student expenditure, much more needs to be done to ensure that housing is suitable and affordable – especially in London.

We often overlook food as an issue but, with 14% of students saying that they skip meals when on-campus (and those who skip meals are more likely to be students from POLAR quintile 1 areas), it is clear that much more needs to be done to ensure that students are able to afford to eat and eat healthily.

Meanwhile, figures on wellbeing are worrying. 37% of female students said their wellbeing had worsened since being at university; 42% of lesbian, gay or bisexual students report worsening wellbeing, and 45% of students from quintile 1 (most deprived areas) report their wellbeing has worsened since starting university. The Higher Education sector has work to do not just in treating mental health issues but also to interrogate the underlying causes which may be leading to drop-out.

Our study covers over 8,000 students studying at over 120 providers, appropriately weighted, and the 26 sponsoring Students' Unions have access to local data that can usefully be compared against the national picture.

A Consortium of Students' Unions

About this study

- 26 Students' Unions involved in scoping and design
- 8,106 current higher education students studying in the United Kingdom
- Respondents were studying at 124 different providers
- Full-time undergraduate, part-time undergraduate, and postgraduate students were all represented
- The questionnaire was conducted online
- Respondents were surveyed from 5 May until 24 May
- Quota sampling was used to enhance the representativeness of the sample
- Findings have been weighted by provider and by gender

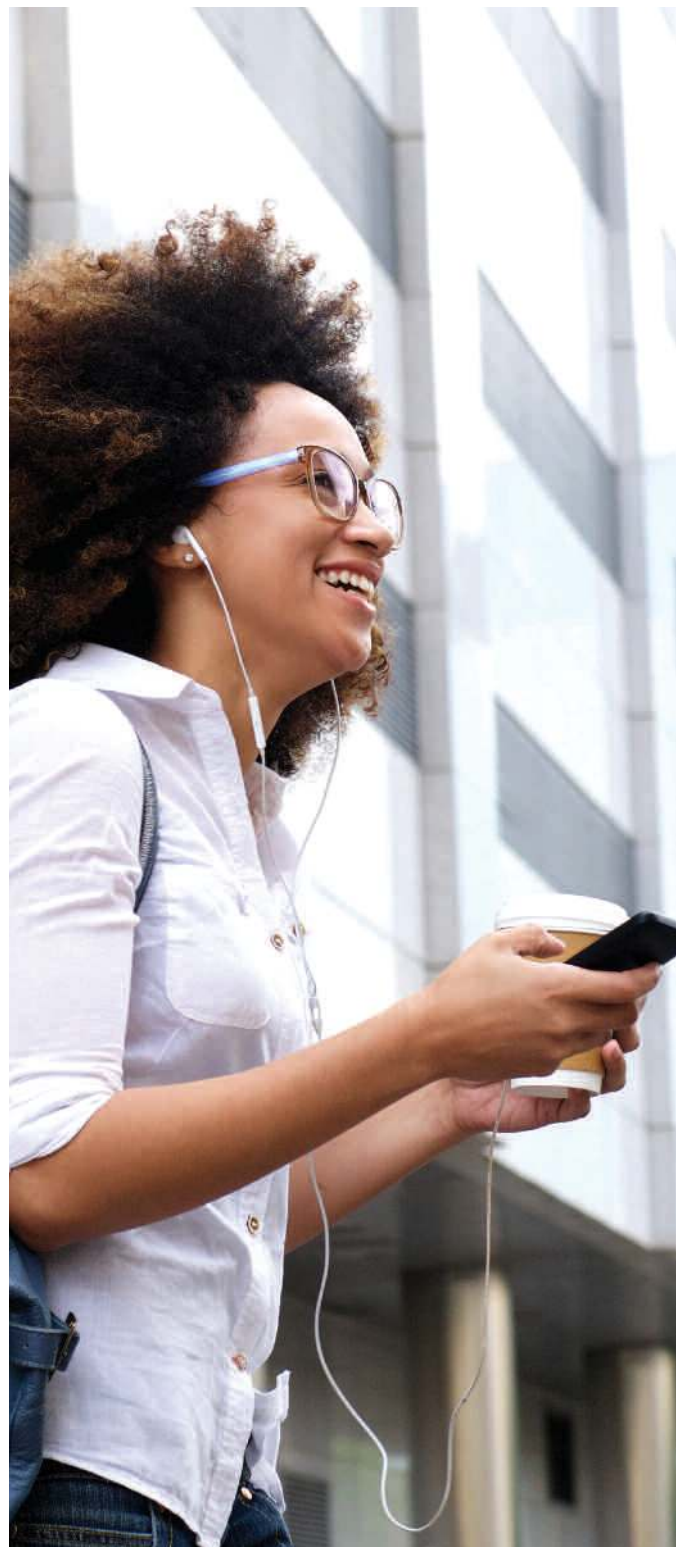
Technical notes

1. This study was commissioned by a consortium of Students' Unions. The full list of commissioning unions may be found at the back of this report.
2. Respondents were given 'not applicable' as an option for many of the questions in this study. Where respondents indicated that the question was 'not applicable' to their circumstances, we omitted those responses from the final analysis.
3. All figures in charts have been rounded to the nearest whole number, so many may add up to slightly more or less than 100%.
4. At the end of the report, quotes from respondents are featured to illustrate themes in the qualitative responses.
5. POLAR4 is a measure of young participation in higher education. It measures the proportion of young people who enter higher education aged 18 or 19. Quintile 1 indicates the lowest participating areas; quintile 5 indicates the highest participation. For more information on POLAR4, please follow this link: www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/polar-participation-of-local-areas.



Findings at a glance

- Given the chance, 30% of students would change their choice of student accommodation.
- 1 in 5 students are not happy with their accommodation.
- 42% of students bring their own food from home most days of the week. Only 18% buy food from an outlet on-campus, 17% buy food off-campus, and 14% say that they skip meals while they're on-campus. Those who skip meals are more likely to be students from POLAR quintile 1 areas.
- 43% of students do not think that the cost of the food on-campus is reasonable.
- 18% of students do not think that the quality of the food on-campus is reasonable.
- 21% of students have considered dropping out of university in the last six months.
- 34% of students say that their wellbeing has worsened since they started university. 36% report no change to their wellbeing, while 30% say that their wellbeing has improved.
- Only 22% of students identify themselves as both a member of the local community and a student, while 77% of students identify themselves as solely a student.
- Across the whole of the UK, 58% of students travel to university by walking, 34% get the bus, 15% travel by car, 13% travel by train, and 7% cycle.
- 76% of students who travel to university commute for 30 minutes or less. 11% of students commute for one hour or more.



Housing and accommodation

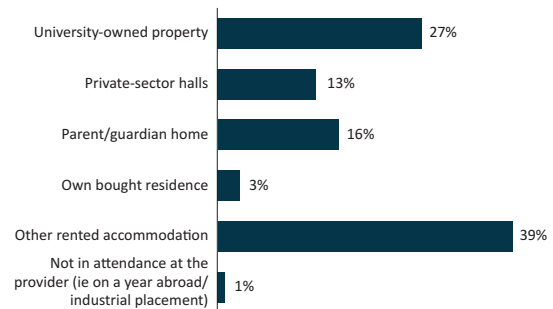
At the beginning of the survey we asked students about their living situation. 27% of respondents lived in a university-owned property, 13% lived in private-sector halls, and 16% lived at home with their parents or guardians. 39% lived in “other rented accommodation”, which includes privately renting with housemates.

21% of students from state schools live at home with their parents or guardians and 35% live in university-owned property or private-sector halls. By comparison, only 8% of those from a private school live at home, but almost half (48%) live in university-owned property or private-sector halls.

Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (BAME) students are significantly more likely to live with their parents or guardians: 23% of minority ethnic students live at home compared to only 11% of white students.

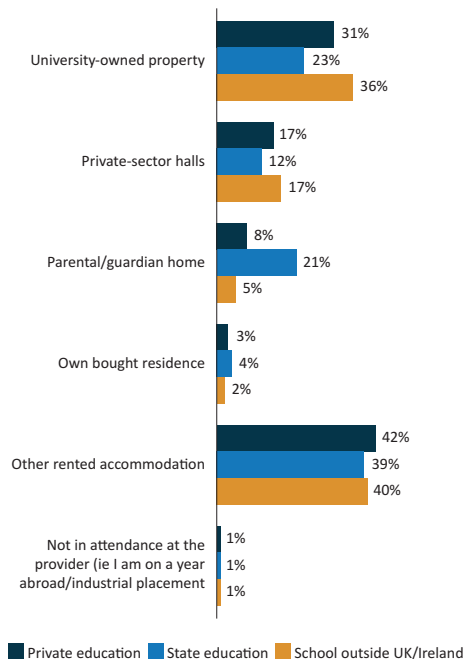
Which type of accommodation do you live in during term-time?

Total sample



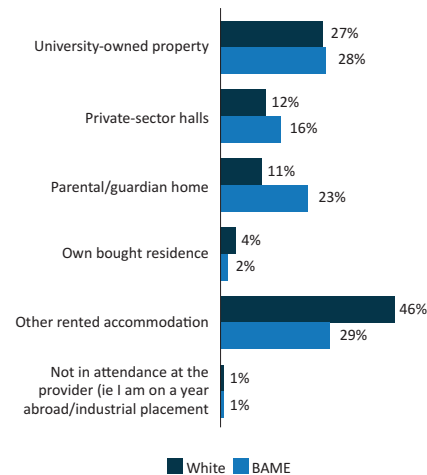
Which type of accommodation do you live in during term-time?

Cut by students' school type



Which type of accommodation do you live in during term-time?

Cut by students' ethnic background



Overall, 20% of students said they were unhappy with their accommodation. Dissatisfaction levels were similar for students living in a university-owned property (22%), private-sector halls (22%) and other rented accommodation (24%). Students living at home had the lowest rate of dissatisfaction (7%).

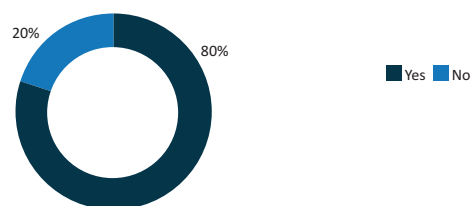
Next, we asked students whether they would change the choice of their accommodation, if given the chance. About a third of students said they would change their accommodation if given the chance. 40% of students in private-sector halls said they would change their accommodation, compared to only 32% of students in university-owned properties.

In university-owned accommodation it is common for the contract to cover all of a student's bills: bills are included for 92% of students in university-owned accommodation, compared to only 79% of students in private-sector halls and 30% of students in other rented accommodation.



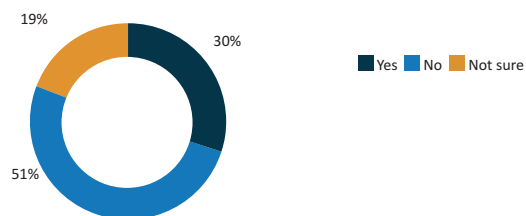
Are you happy with your accommodation?

Total sample



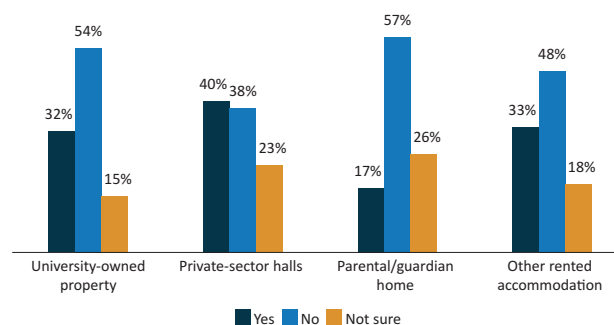
Given the chance, would you change your choice of student accommodation?

Total sample



Given the chance, would you change your choice of student accommodation?

Cut by students' accommodation



We also asked students a series of questions that explored how and why they selected their accommodation, university and whether they think about accommodation when choosing their university.

When students are deciding on their accommodation they prioritise cost (64%), the distance from campus (60%), and the quality of the room itself (48%). Almost no other factors matter: less than 10% of students considered the facilities and amenities, the local social scene, local retail, or the quality of the communal space.

When deciding on a university, students consider the course content (55%), location (44%), teaching quality (37%) and league table position (33%). Only 5% say that they consider the standard of university accommodation, while only 3% consider the availability of university accommodation.

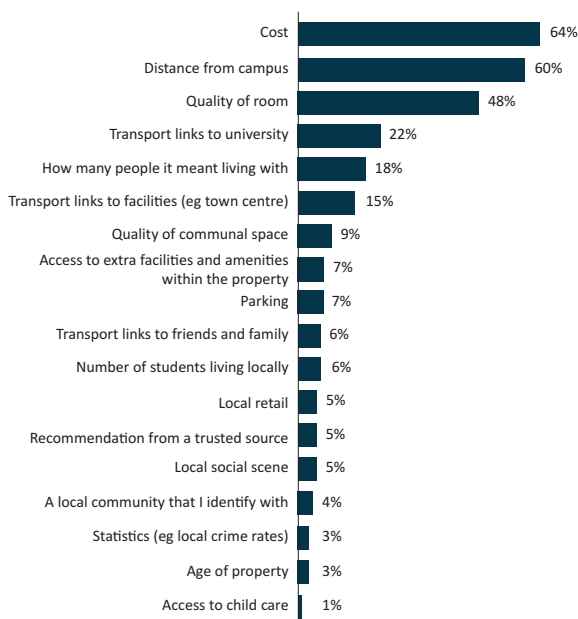
Policy questions

The residential model of “going to university” continues to dominate UK higher education. Students choose their institution on course content, location, teaching quality and league table positions but, once this choice is made, they need somewhere to live.

A significant number are not satisfied with their accommodation, and a large percentage would switch if they could. With cost and distance from campus key factors in driving student choice in accommodation, institutions and policy makers will need to do all they can to ensure that accommodation options remain within reasonable travel distance and budget for students. There is also a real danger that those from disadvantaged backgrounds “miss out” on key aspects of university life given their preference for living at home – institutions and policy makers need to take steps to ensure that these “day trippers” are fully included in campus life.

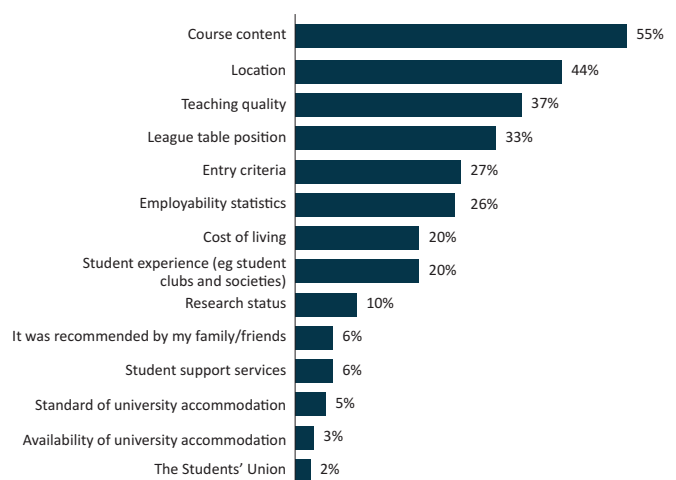
Which factors were most important to you when choosing your accommodation?

Total sample



Which three factors were most important to you when deciding which university/HE provider to study at?

Total sample



Food and eating habits

To explore students' on-campus eating habits, we asked how much they usually spend, where they buy their food and what they think about the quality, cost and choice of food on-campus.

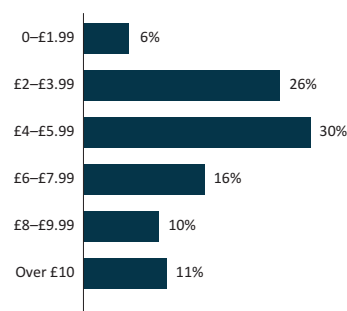
32% of students spend between £0 and £3.99 on food every day and only 11% spend more than £10 every day. Female students tend to spend less on food on-campus: 27% of male students spend up to £4 every day, compared to 36% of female students.

Overall, 42% of students bring their own food from home most days of the week. Only 18% buy food from an outlet on-campus, 17% buy food off-campus, and 14% say that they skip meals while they're on-campus.

Female students are more likely to bring their own food from home rather than purchase food at university or nearby. 47% of female students bring food from home, compared to 36% of male students. Male students are 7% more likely than female students to purchase food off-campus (21% compared to 14%).

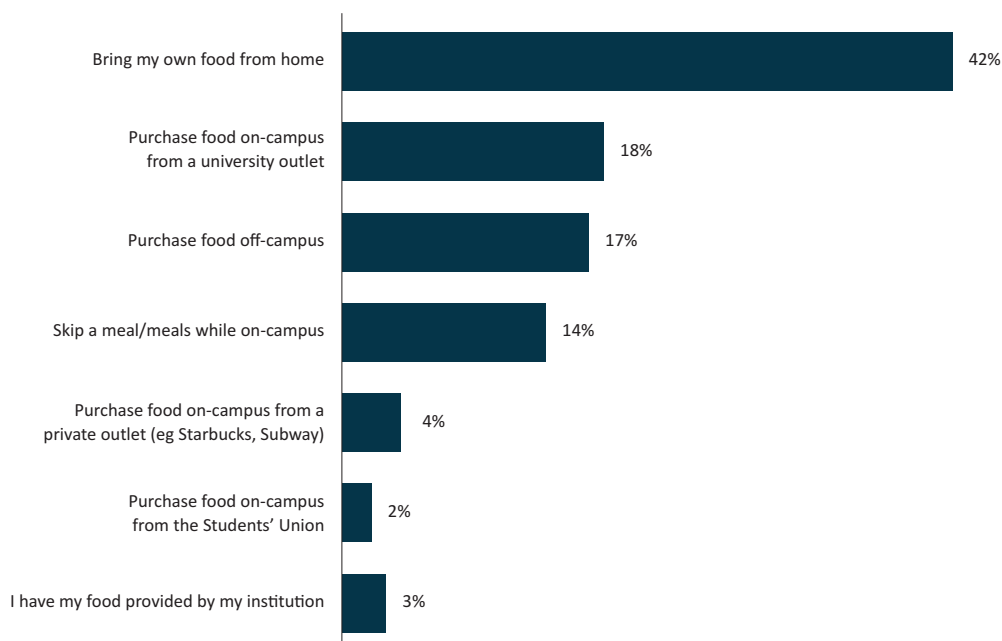
On average my daily spend on food is...

Total sample



On most days of the week, which of the following do you do?

Total sample



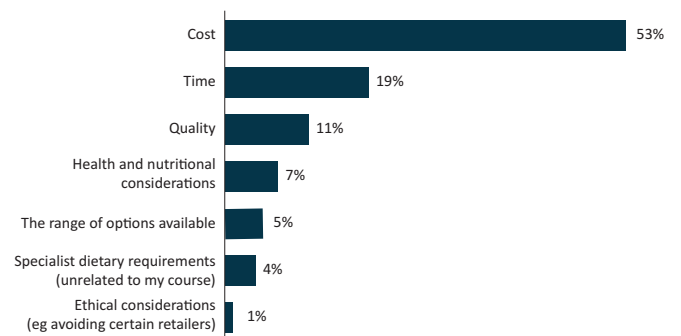
41% of black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) students report buying food from university outlets or nearby, and only slightly over a third (35%) report bringing their food from home. White students have slightly different eating behaviours, with almost half of them (47%) bringing their food from home and 30% buying it on or off campus.

Those who skip meals are more likely to be students from POLAR quintile 1 areas (18% of quintile 1 students skip meals, and only 35% of those quintile 1 students bring food from home). Lesbian, gay and bisexual students are more likely to skip meals while on-campus (20% report skipping a meal, compared to 14% of the students that self-identify as heterosexual).

When asked about their motivation for the way they eat, 53% of students say cost, 19% time and 11% quality. Their priority order does not change when we look at different student demographics.

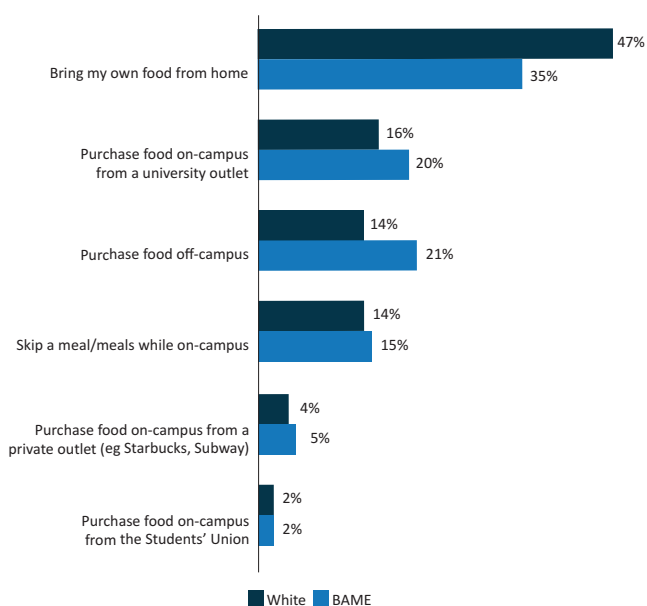
Which of the following things is your main motivation for the way you eat while on-campus?

Total sample



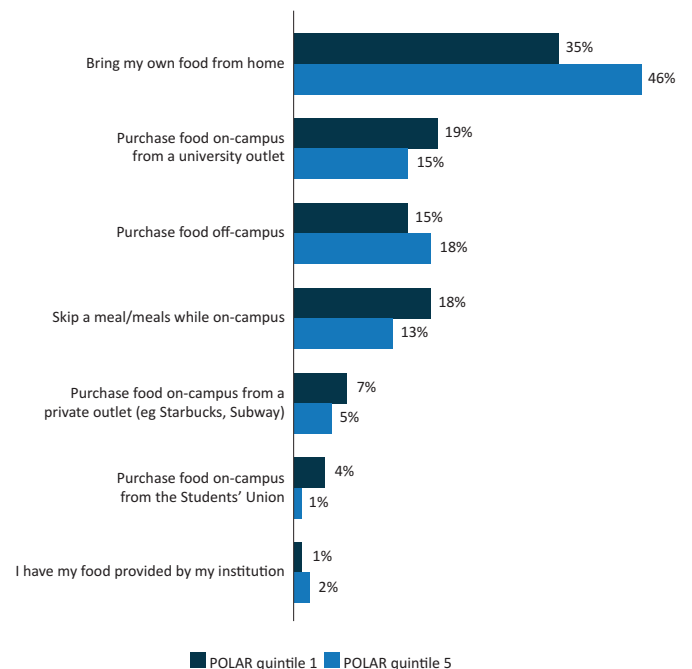
On most days of the week, which of the following do you do?

Cut by students' ethnic background



On most days of the week, which of the following do you do?

Cut by students' social background



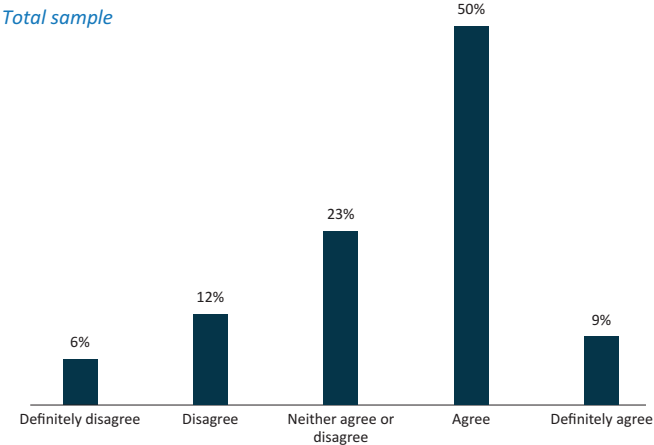
Almost 2 in 10 students (18%) do not think that the quality of food on-campus is reasonable. Furthermore, 23% of students do not think that the choice of food on-campus is reasonable and almost half (43%) do not think that the cost of food on-campus is reasonable.

Those that come from POLAR quintile 1 are 10% more likely to be dissatisfied with the choice of food on-campus compared to those from POLAR quintile 5 (30% compared to 20%). However, in terms of their perceptions of the cost of the food, there are no significant differences. When we look at ethnic background, 30% of black, Asian and minority ethnic background students reporting being dissatisfied with the choice of food on-campus, compared to only 20% of white students.

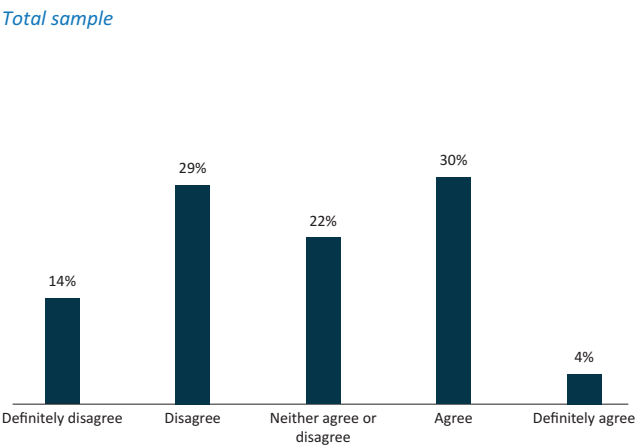
Policy questions

The data suggests real questions over quality and cost of food on-campus. Almost half of all students think there is a cost problem and a significant number are skipping meals. Campus catering often benefits from VAT exemptions and it's crucial that costs reflect this benefit.

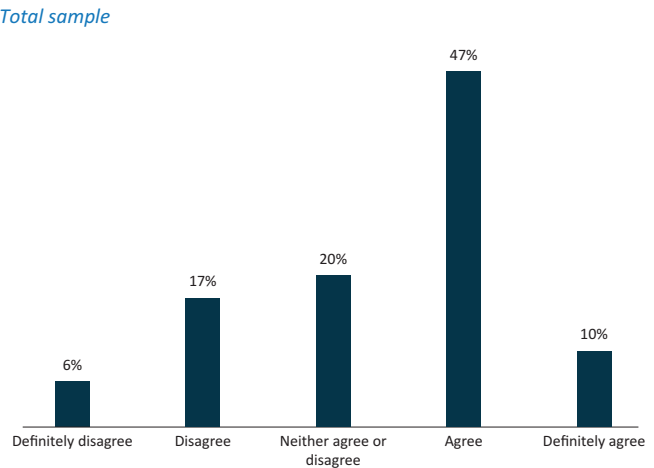
I think the quality of food on my campus is reasonable



I think the cost of food on my campus is reasonable



I think the choice of food on my campus is reasonable



Community engagement

To be a student is, in many ways, to be part of a community. In this project we wanted to explore which communities students feel they are a part of, including whether they engage with their Students' Union, whether they take part in volunteering and whether they're involved with politics at a student, local or national level.

We asked respondents to indicate whether they feel like a member of the student community, a member of the local community, or both a student and a member of the local community. 77% of students said they predominantly identify as a student, while 22% said that they identify as both a student and a member of the local community.

Only 15% of students who live in a university-owned property feel like a student and a member of the local community, while a third of students who live with their parents/guardians feel like both a student and a member of the community.

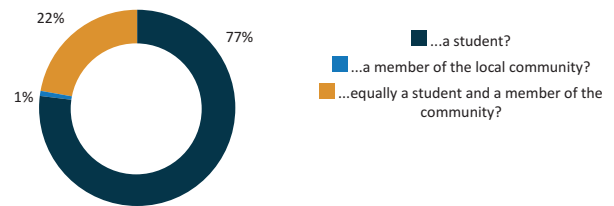
31% of students who have a commute longer than 20 minutes identify as both a member of the local community and a student. Those from a private/independent school are least likely to feel like both a member of the local community and a student (17%).

While it's useful for Students' Unions to know how this figure varies for different student groups, the key factor is likely to be whether the respondent has moved away from home. Students living at home with their parents are more likely to feel like both a student and a member of their community because they lived in that community before they became a student. Those who commute more than 20 minutes and those who attend small and specialist institutions are more likely to live at home with their parents, and those who attended private school are more likely to move away from home when they enter higher education.

It is interesting to note that no student groups in this study had a majority of respondents who felt like both a student and a member of the local community.

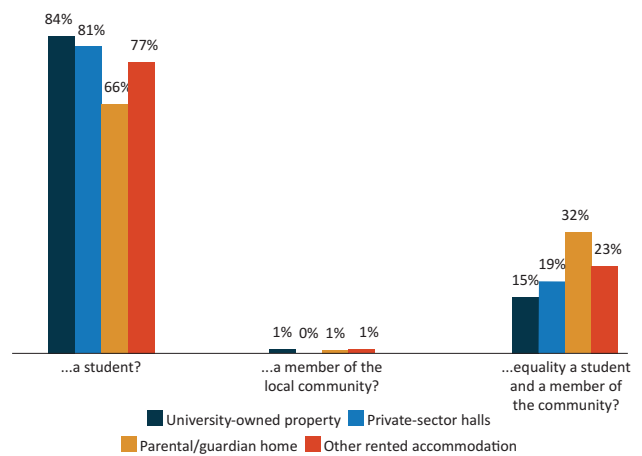
Do you predominantly identify yourself as

Total sample



Do you predominantly identify yourself as

Cut by students' accommodation



We asked students to tell us about their level of political engagement. We found that only 8% are members of a national political party. Self-reported levels of voting were, however, high: 56% said that they voted in local elections and 61% said they voted in national elections.

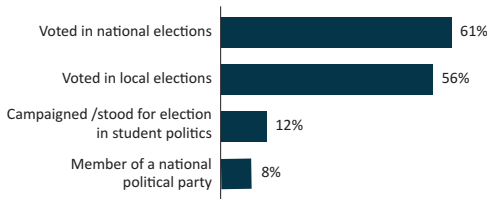
When we asked about extracurricular experience we found that 20% of respondents have work experience of at least three months in length, a similar proportion had an internship and 40% of students have done some kind of volunteering or charity work.

First year students had lower levels of work experience and internship experience. By the time students reach their final year 23% have work experience of three months or more and 25% have done an internship.

Social profile influences the type of experience students are likely to collect while at university. Students with a private education and those who come from wealthier backgrounds are more likely to have completed an internship and they're more likely to do volunteering or charity work while at university. 29% of privately educated students have taken an internship, compared to only 16% of state educated students. 45% of privately educated students have done volunteering or charity work, compared to only 38% of state educated students. Only 14% of students eligible for means-tested funding have done an internship, compared to 26% of students who are not eligible for means-tested funding.

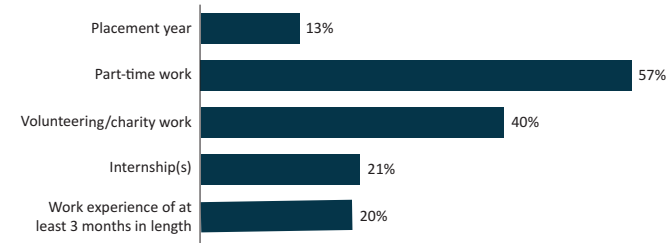
Have you participated in any of the following political activities?

Total sample



Which of the following types of experience have you had while studying at your university/HE provider?

Total sample



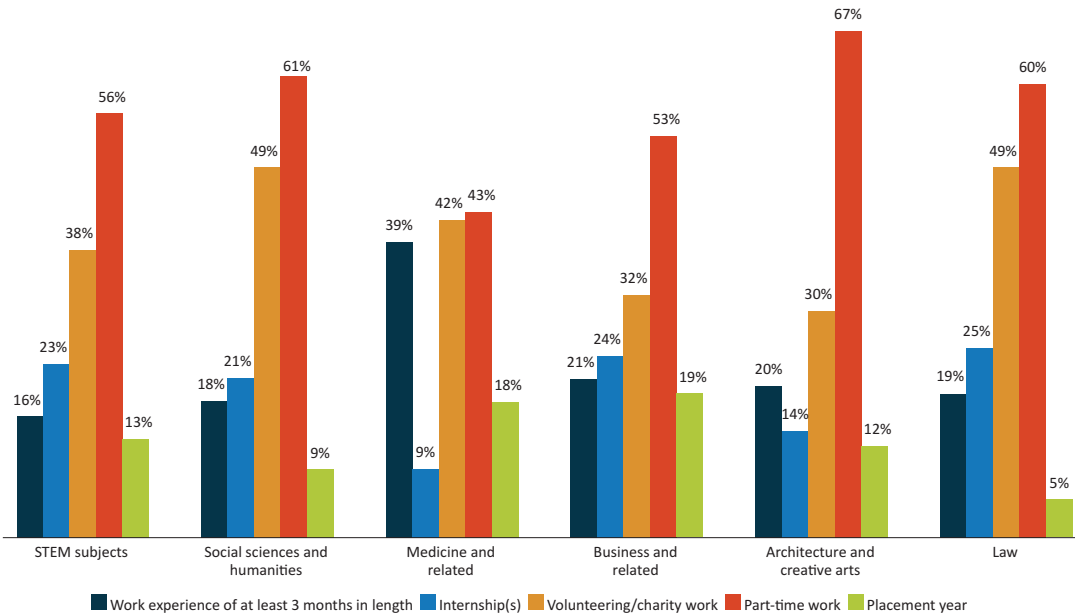
Policy questions

As higher education expands, community engagement is a key issue for higher education providers. There is considerable debate about “somewheres” and “nowheres” and real pressure building from local communities worried about the impact of studentification of towns and cities.

The data suggests that much more can be done to build links between students and communities, to benefit both the communities they join and their own personal development.

Which of the following types of experience have you had while studying at your university/HE provider?

Cut by students' subject of study



Student wellbeing

We asked respondents to self-assess whether their wellbeing had improved or worsened since they started university. The question was: "Think about how you've been feeling on a day-to-day basis since you started university, compared to how you felt before you started university. Has your wellbeing... 1) got worse since you started university? 2) stayed the same since you started university? 3) got better since you started university?"

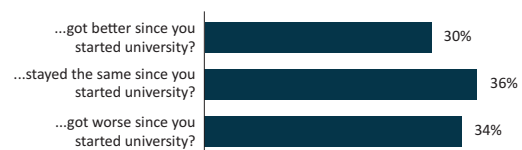
34% of students said that their wellbeing had worsened since they started university. 36% reported no change, while 30% said that their wellbeing had improved.

Which students are more likely to report a decline in wellbeing since starting university?

- A higher percentage of female students reported a decline in wellbeing: 37% of female student said their wellbeing had worsened, compared to 29% of male students.
- 42% of lesbian, gay or bisexual students report worsening wellbeing, which is much higher than average.
- When we examine respondents by POLAR quintiles we find that a high 45% of students from quintile 1 (most deprived areas) report their wellbeing has worsened since starting university.
- 27% of first-year students say that their wellbeing got worse since starting university, compared to 39% of finalists
- 41% of students who commute for 20 minutes or more to get to university say their wellbeing has worsened.
- 38% of Black/African/Caribbean ethnicity students say their wellbeing has declined since starting university.
- 45% of students with a disability say their wellbeing has worsened since starting university.

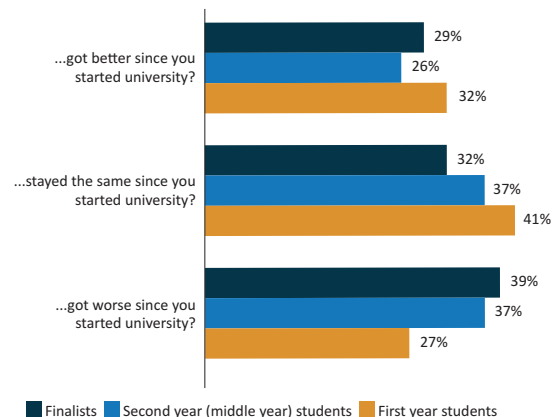
Think about how you've been feeling on a day-to-day basis since you started university, compared to how you felt before you started university. Has your wellbeing

Total sample



Has your wellbeing

Cut by students' year group



We also explored whether students had considered deferring an assessment or examination within the last six months, and whether students had considered dropping out of university within the last six months.

Overall, 21% of students have considered deferring an assessment or examination in the last six months. 21% of students have also considered dropping out of university in the last six months.

Students who report that their wellbeing has worsened are also more likely to have considered deferring examinations or dropping out in the last six months. 34% of students whose wellbeing has worsened said they have considered deferring an examination, while 38% said that they have considered dropping out.

32% of lesbian, gay or bisexual students, 32% of students from POLAR quintile 1, and 38% of students with a disability said they have considered dropping out of university in the last six months.

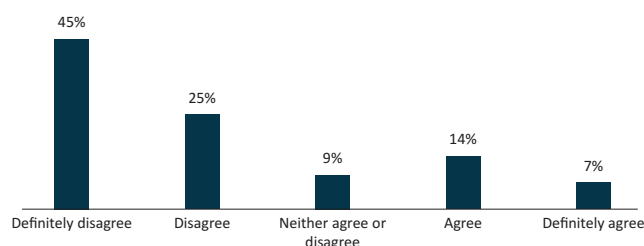
Policy questions

Mental health is a crucial contemporary challenge in higher education. Often the focus is on services that treat the symptoms – counselling waiting lists and support services – but the data suggests a wider focus on prevention is important to consider.

The differential impacts on different groups of students also deserve detailed interrogation and policy interventions – often the focus is on access, but there may well be links to wider issues facing these groups in going on to succeed at university.

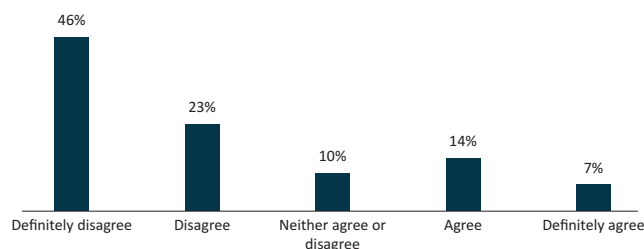
I have considered deferring an assessment/examination within the last 6 months

Total sample



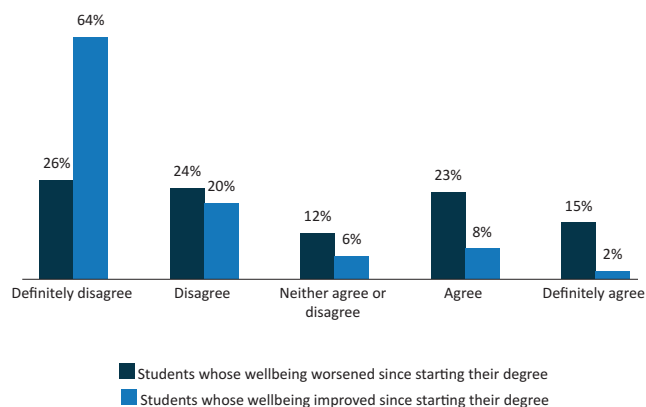
I have considered dropping out of university in the last 6 months

Total sample



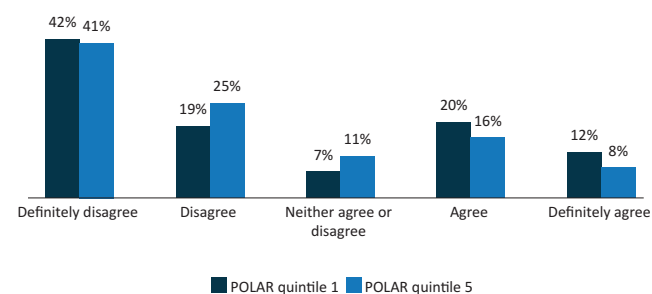
I have considered dropping out of university in the last 6 months

Cut by students' self-assessed wellbeing



I have considered dropping out of university in the last 6 months

Cut by students' social background



Travel and commuter students

Students who live off-site are likely to experience higher education differently, and we wanted to explore those differences. Do students who commute engage with student services differently? Do they feel like more of a member of their local community? And do they feel more or less positive about higher education overall?

In our sample 35% of students live on-site at their higher education provider, while 65% live off-site.

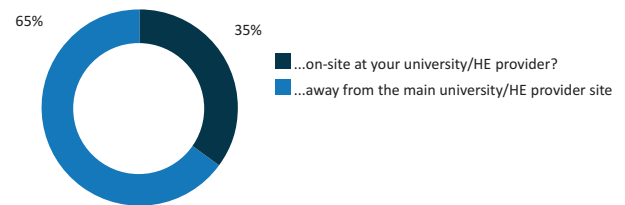
Students who live off-site spend fewer days on-campus, some only travelling to the campus one or two days a week and some students have to travel an hour or more to get on-site. 45% of students who live off-site travel to the university five days a week or more, while 9% of students who live off-site only spend one or two days on-site.

76% of students who travel to university commute for 30 minutes or less. Only 11% of students commute for one hour or more.

Across the whole of the UK, 58% of students travel to university by walking, 34% get the bus, 15% travel by car, 13% travel by train, and 7% cycle.

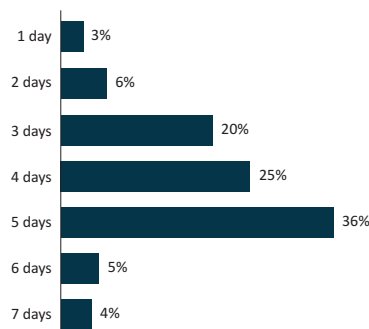
Do you live...

Total sample



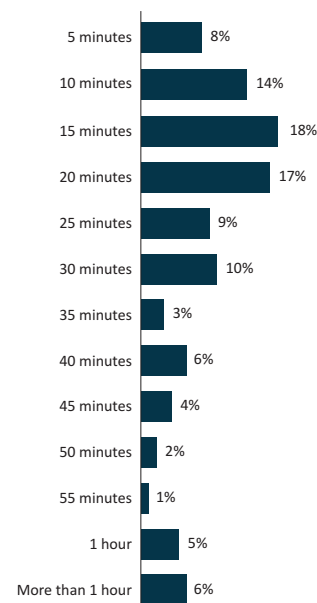
How many days of the week are you on-site at your university HE provider?

Total sample



How long does it take you to commute to your university/HE provider?

Total sample

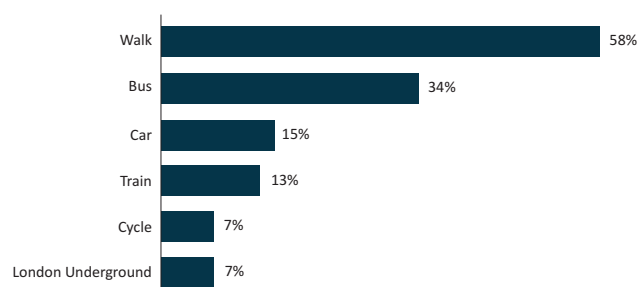


In order to explore the differences between “commuter students” and students who live on-site, we created two groups: we defined “commuter students” as students who travel 20 minutes or more to get to the campus. We compared these commuter students to students who commute less than 20 minutes or not at all. We found the following:

- Commuter students are more likely to consider dropping out of university (23%, compared to 21% for non-commuters).
- Commuter students are more likely to consider deferring an examination (24%, compared to 19% for non-commuters).
- 41% of commuter students say their wellbeing has worsened since they started university, which is much higher than non-commuter students (32%).
- 31% of commuter students feel like both a student and a member of the local community, compared to only 19% of non-commuter students.
- 34% of commuter students live at home with their parents/guardians, which is likely to inform many of the differences we observe. For example, 53% of commuter students prioritised location when selecting their university and only 13% prioritised student experience (student clubs and societies).
- Commuter students are as satisfied with the quality of the course as non-commuter students.
- Commuter students are as satisfied as non-commuter students that the Students’ Union effectively represents students’ academic interests.
- Commuter students are less likely to agree with the statement “I feel part of a community of staff and students”. Only 59% agreed, compared to 68% of non-commuter students.

How do you travel to your university/HE provider?

Total sample



Policy questions

There may be multiple underpinning reasons why commuter students face challenges of the type the data suggests – not least social class – but in any event it is clear that commuter students feel less a “part” of the university community and look more likely to drop out or face wellbeing problems. Institutions and policy makers keen to expand participation in HE may well need to consider this group discreetly, generating interventions to ensure that their inclusion and wellbeing is seen as an area to focus on rather than a mere “exception” to the “norm”.



London vs. non-London students

The student experience in London is necessarily different from the student experience outside of London, so by taking all students from London-based universities and comparing them to all students outside of London we investigated the key differences.

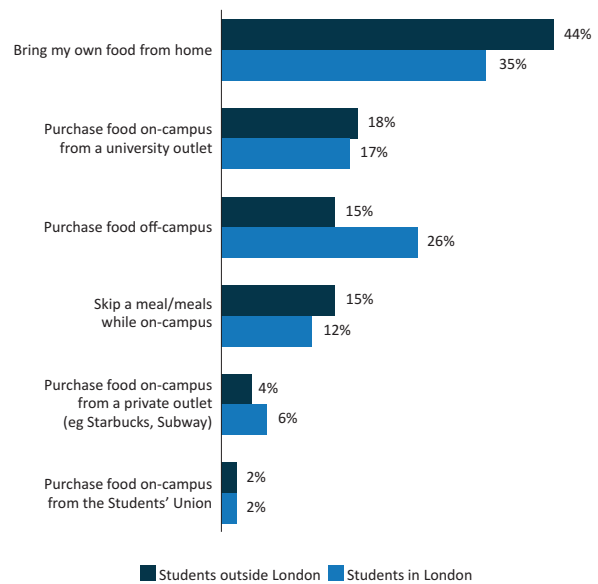
London students tend to spend more on food: 19% spend more than £10 a day compared to only 10% of students outside of London. They are also more likely to purchase food off-campus (26%, compared to 15% non-London) and less likely to bring their own food from home (35%, compared to 44% non-London).

Travel in London is dominated by the tube and by trains, which 70% of students use to travel to campus. Walking is significantly less popular in London, with only 43% of London students walking compared to 62% of non-London students.

Students in London tend to travel for longer to get to their campus: 24% travel one hour or more, compared to only 9% outside of London.

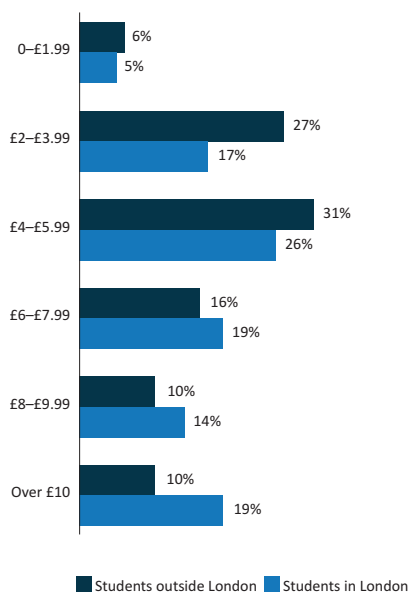
Most days of the week, which of the following do you do?

London versus non-London students



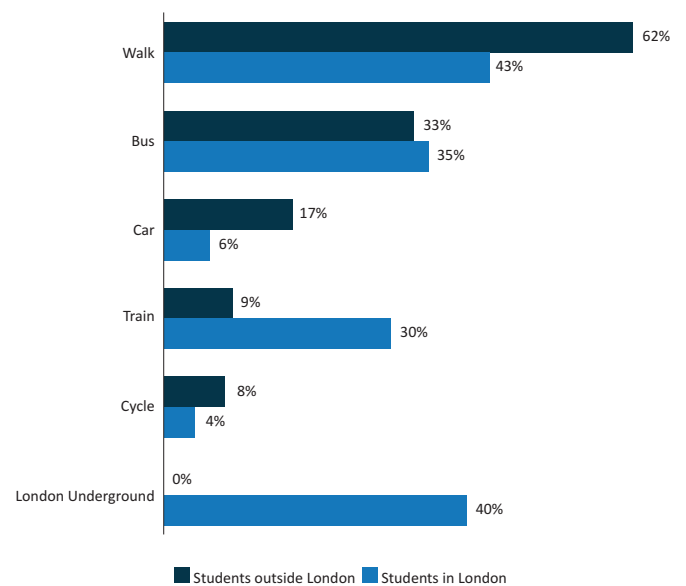
On average my daily spend on food is...

London versus non-London students



How do you travel to your university/HE provider?

London versus non-London students



Students in London are much more likely to live in their parental/guardian home: 30% of London students live at home, with lower percentages living in private-sector halls and other rented accommodation. About a quarter of London students live in university-owned accommodation, which is similar to the non-London students.

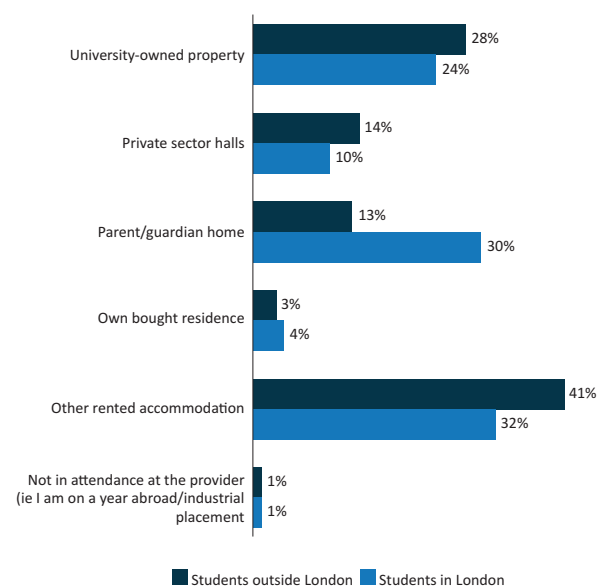
Fewer London students say that they do not feel like a part of a “community of staff and students”: only 56% disagree with the statement, compared to 67% of non-London students.

Policy questions

Students in London consistently rate their overall HE experience more negatively than others in national studies such as the National Student Survey (NSS). This data gives some clues as to why – they face dramatically higher costs and are less likely to feel part of a community. Policy makers will need to consider carefully how the student funding system might support London students to take part in HE in as meaningful way as their colleagues around the country. Both institutions and Students’ Unions will want to consider how they might build social capital and encourage social networking in innovative ways around London.

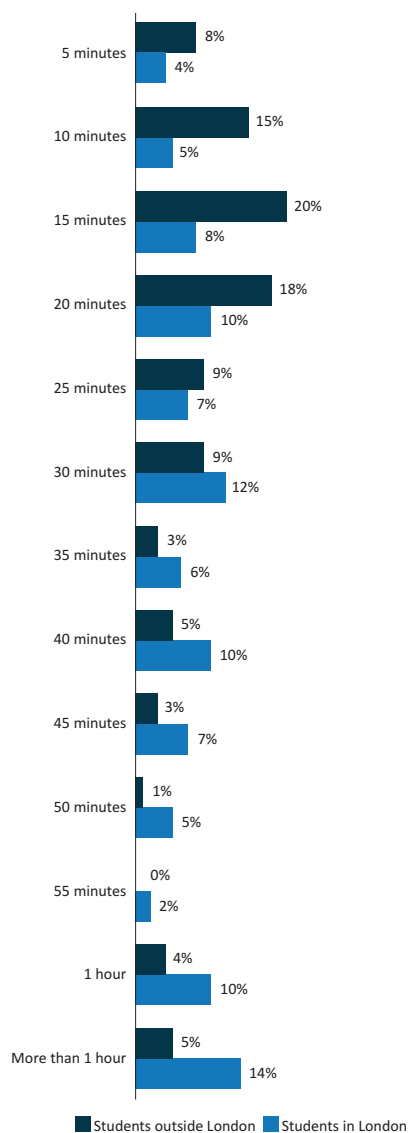
What type of accommodation do you live in during term-time?

London versus non-London students



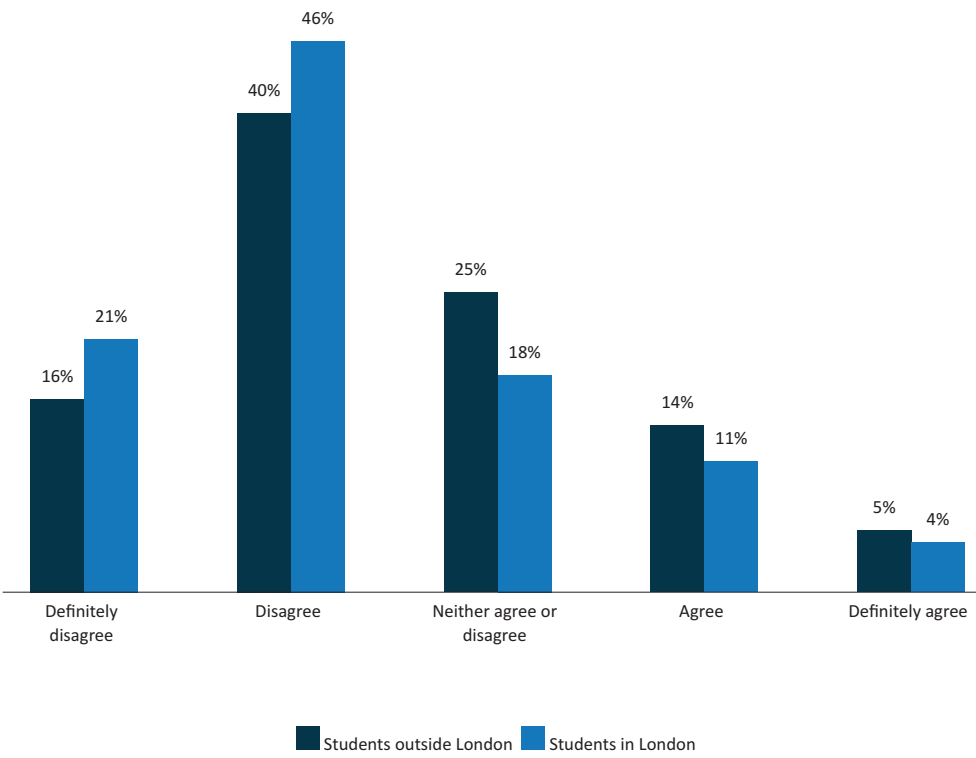
How long does it take to commute to your university/HE provider?

London versus non-London students



I feel part of a community of staff and students

London versus non-London students



Students on their university experience

Finally, we asked respondents to tell us in their own words what the best aspects of being a student are and what they would change about their university experience.

What do you think are the best aspects of being a student?

The thrill of being independent, experiencing new things and facing challenges that I never thought I could conquer myself.

The support network of friends you make as you are all going through the same thing.

The social community you can have with other students.

Meeting new people. Different sorts of people than you are used to from school/college etc. Living with people you don't know and making strong bonds. Gaining confidence in yourself by living away from home and having new experiences all the time.

Autonomy, growing-up, reality checks, meeting people outside your home "bubble" and working hard towards a goal.

Access to quality sources of information and online learning and being taught the skills to make the most of them. Feeling that I am making progress in my life and that perhaps better things lie ahead.

What I learn academically is extremely interesting and valuable, however, what I have learned about myself personally is invaluable.

Social life, learning abilities, sports opportunities, chance to be yourself and try lots of new things, chance to move away from home and become more independent.

Learning to be independent, learning to manage your own time and finances.

Is there anything that you would change about your university experience?

Yes, I would like to live closer but that would end up costing £2,100 extra per year. My student loan doesn't even cover half of my rent currently.

The biggest challenge for me has been my living situation this year. It would have been useful to have a tutor meeting or something just to provide some guidance on choosing somewhere to live.

Stay closer to university. The distance to walk to and back from university puts me off from doing anything extra besides lectures.

I would have embraced the student experience more. It took me a while to grow the confidence I needed to meet new people and fully enjoy myself and I was very glad I finally did.

No. Despite feeling left out of the loop at times due to staying at home I think it was the more sensible choice.

University needs more accommodation rather than sticking us a 40-minute walk away and telling us to "accept or it no further accommodation will be given".

Unfriendly campus environment.

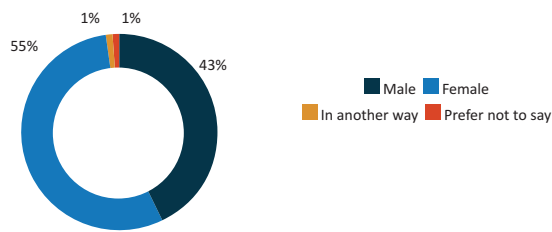
Pick a university that is cheaper to avoid so much debt and living costs.

I would have preferred to study full time but could not afford to. Balancing part-time work and my course is exhausting.

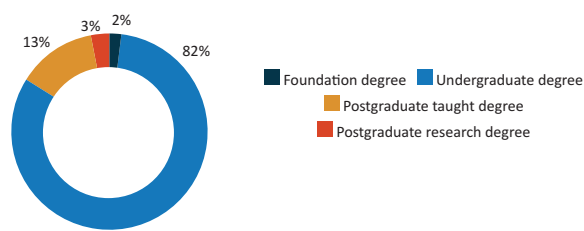


Profile of respondents

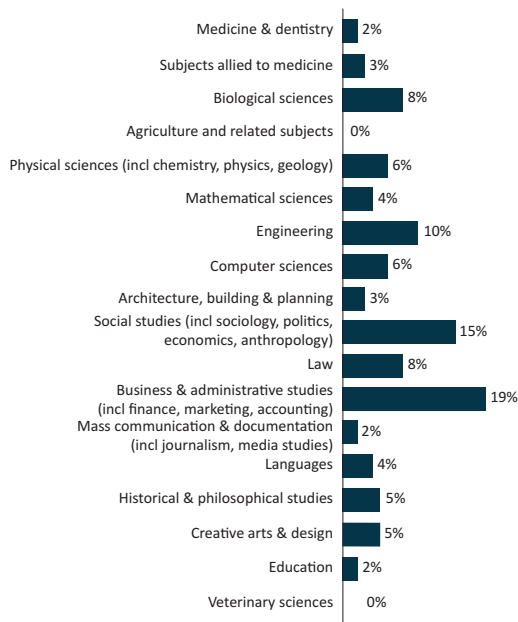
I identify my gender as



What type of course are you currently completing/ did you complete?



Which one of the following best describes your main subject of study?



Participating Students' Unions

Birkbeck Students' Union
Birmingham City University Students' Union
Bournemouth University Students' Union
City, University of London Students' Union
Coventry University Students' Union
Goldsmiths Students' Union
Greenwich Students' Union
Hertfordshire Students' Union
Liverpool Students' Union
London South Bank Students' Union
Middlesex University Students' Union
Queen Mary Students' Union
Roehampton Students' Union
Royal Veterinary College Students' Union
SOAS Students' Union
Staffordshire University Students' Union
University of East Anglia Students' Union
University of Bedfordshire Students' Union
University of Central Lancashire Students' Union
University of Exeter Students' Union
University of Leicester Students' Union
University of Northampton Students' Union
University of Salford Students' Union
University of Warwick Students' Union
University of Westminster Students' Union
Winchester Students' Union





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