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Experiences and Risk Among Commuter Students in Higher Education

Summary report

Make better decisions

Savanta:

Table of Contents

Background and key findings 2
Background 2
Key findings 2
Methodology 3
Research design 3
Sample profile 3
Notes for interpretation 4
Identifying “commuter students” 5
Defining and measuring “impact on student experience” 5
Defining and measuring “withdrawal risk” 6
Baseline profiling 6
Background and circumstances 6
Living arrangements 7
Travel arrangements and cost 7
Commuting impact on student experience 9
Self-reported overall impact on student experience 9
Time on campus and participation in university/college life 11
Sense of belonging and wellbeing 14
Calculated overall impact on student experience 16
Academic impact of commuting 17
Commuting impact on risk of withdrawal from studies 19
Consideration of dropping out 19
Calculated overall impact on withdrawal risk 19
Supporting commuters 20
Institutional support: current provisions and needs 20
Comparing measures of commuter students 22
Comparison of commuter definitions by time, address, living arrangement and cost 22
Self-identification as commuters 24
Conclusions 24
Appendices 26
Appendix A 26

Background and key findings

Background

Current data points to a steady rise in the number of students commuting to university, with around 31% of UK 18-year-old applicants now intending to live at home.[1] However, this shift isn't happening evenly. Students from lower-income backgrounds are far more likely to commute, and that often brings a different set of pressures that can shape how they experience higher education day-to-day.

At the same time, inconsistencies in how **commuter students** are measured (i.e. by distance, time, or living arrangement) make it challenging to determine what the biggest challenges are and how best to address them.

This research was commissioned by the Office for Students (OfS) to build a clearer picture of who commuter students are, why they commute, and how commuting might affect their choices and experiences. A structured, quantitative approach was used, which comprised an online survey with a sample size of 1,069 respondents. The analysis compares travel time alongside address, living arrangement and weekly travel cost as alternative ways of identifying commuter students. This allows the research to examine where negative effects are most apparent and whether combining different characteristics provides a more useful way of identifying students whose experiences are shaped by their status as 'commuters'. In doing so the report compares different measures of commuting to assess how effectively they distinguish between students with differing experiences. A fuller explanation of the measures used is provided in the Methodology section.

Key findings

Longer journey times are associated with poorer student experiences

Travel time is the feature of commuting most consistently associated with negative student experiences. Among students travelling for under 45 minutes, 28-32% report a high or moderate impact on their student experience. This rises to around half (47-55%) among those travelling for 45 minutes or more. The proportion reporting no negative impact falls from 51% among those travelling for under 30 minutes to around a quarter among those travelling for 90 minutes or more. This indicates a graded relationship, where the likelihood and severity of negative outcomes increase as journey length increases.

Different measures of commuting identify overlapping but distinct groups of students

The research shows that travel time, address, living arrangement and cost identify overlapping but distinct groups of students. Travel time and weekly cost capture the burden of the journey itself, while address and living arrangement capture the residential circumstances in which commuting is experienced. When address is used to identify commuters, a broader group of students in captured, including some students with short or manageable journeys. Travel time therefore distinguishes affected students more clearly than address alone, while cost and living arrangement provide useful context.

Combining measures can help identify students experiencing multiple commuting-related pressures, such as long journeys combined with high costs or constrained housing choices. However, these combinations typically provide only modest improvements over travel time alone in distinguishing differences in student experience.

Commuting is often a constrained choice, shaped by financial and circumstantial pressures

Among students travelling 45 minutes or more to their place of study, around 35% say they would have preferred to live elsewhere but were unable to do so because of considerations around cost. This is nearly twice the proportion among students travelling for less than 45 minutes (19%). Commuters are also somewhat more likely to have received free school meals and to have at least one widening participation

[1] UCAS (2025) More school leavers living at home for university and college study. Available at https://www.ucas.com/corporate/news-and-key-documents/news/more-school-leavers-living-at-home-for-university-and-college-study.

indicator. These findings support existing research which suggests that commuting is often associated with wider structural and financial constraints, rather than being simply a preferred lifestyle choice.

Caring responsibilities are also more common among commuter students. This helps explain why some students may need to remain close to home and why the same journey may be harder for some students to absorb than others.

The most pronounced effects of commuting are on participation, access, and engagement

Students with longer journeys are less likely to feel they belong at their institution than those with shorter journeys. However, the most pronounced differences are found in relation to measures of participation, access and engagement. Students with longer and more expensive journeys are more likely to decide not to travel to campus, spend less time there, miss support opportunities and be unable to take part in wider university activities. While commuting can affect students' sense of belonging, the strongest differences observed in this research related to participation in and access to university life.

Many commuters cannot identify visible institutional support and want practical changes

More than two in five commuters are unable to identify any support for commuter students provided by their institution. Around one in five rate their university or college's support for travel as poor, while just over two in five rate it positively. The improvements most commonly selected as likely to make a difference are practical: travel discounts or bursaries, earlier notice of timetable changes, more compact timetabling and greater online or hybrid flexibility.

Self-identification does not reliably capture affected commuter students

Students' own understanding of whether they are commuters does not align neatly with definitions of 'commuter students' tested in this research. Self-identification increases as the level of impact on student experience rises. Two thirds of students experiencing a high level of impact from their journey to campus or living arrangements identify as commuters, compared with 41% of those experiencing no impact. However, a third of students experiencing a high impact either do not identify as commuters or are uncertain. Self-identification alone would therefore miss a substantial minority of students whose journeys or living arrangements have a significant effect on their experience.

Methodology

Research design

This research addresses three research questions: how commuting relates to student experience and academic outcomes, which measures of commuting shape students' experiences of higher education most strongly and what would most effectively support commuter students.

The research was based on a 10-minute online survey completed by 1,069 students studying in higher education in England. The data collection took place online between 1st and 10th June 2026.

The online respondents represented a range of commuting patterns, living arrangements, and institutional contexts, which are outlined in the following section. While sampling quotas were set to support representation across sex, age, study level, region, and university tariff group, these were applied flexibly and monitored throughout fieldwork to achieve as broad a range of experiences as possible.

Sample profile

To ensure the research included a sufficient number of students with longer journeys, the sampling strategy targeted:

- circa 500 students with a one-way journey of 45 minutes or more to their main place of study, or one hour or more for students living in London, reflecting longer typical journey times in the capital (achieved 524 respondents),
- and circa 500 students travelling below this threshold (achieved 545 respondents).

The 45-minute baseline (60 minutes for London) was selected for sampling purposes to ensure sufficient representation of students with longer journeys. Subsequent analysis suggests that impacts become more pronounced among students travelling for 45 minutes or more. As the chart below shows, students living outside London who commute under 45 minutes are significantly more likely to say they experience no negative impacts on their student experience because of commuting, while impact becomes prominent for those travelling over 45 minutes. A similar pattern is observed among students living in London.

Figure 1. Impact on student experience by travel time

	Under 30 minutes	30–44 minutes	45–59 minutes	60–89 minutes	90+ minutes
Outside London					
Any level of negative impact	45%	57%	67%	63%	71%
No negative impact	51%	41%	32%	36%	28%
London-only					
Any level of negative impact	46%	51%	69%	75%	77%
No negative impact	50%	49%	31%	21%	19%

Source: OfS Commuter student research. Calculated impact on student experience. A2. Thinking about a typical day when you travel in, about how long does your one-way journey usually take from where you are staying to your main place of study? Please include walking, waiting and changing between transport. Base: Outside London: Under 30 minutes (315), 30-44 minutes (120), 45-59 minutes (213), 60-89 minutes (137), 90+ minutes (75). London-only: Under 30 minutes (51), 30-44 minutes (34), 45-59 minutes (25), 60-89 minutes (68), 90+ minutes (31).

The student sample under the commuting time threshold was weighted to be representative of higher education students in England by study level, mode of study, sex by study level, ethnicity by study level and age by study level. These population benchmarks are based on HESA data from 2024/25.

Representative quotas available for commuter students in England use address-based measures only; no equivalent benchmark exists for a time-based, cost-based or living arrangement-based measures. In order to allow us to explore the definition of commuters, and to ensure robustness for the student sample that meets the commuting time threshold criteria, survey invitations were sent to a sample pool that is representative of higher education students in England based on HESA data from 2024/25. The only screening rule set for this segment was the time-based measure described above. As a result, demographic characteristics are based on a natural fallout from this screening rule rather than a weighted or independently verified benchmark, and the sample is not weighted to any external commuter population. This is a limitation of the design that should be borne in mind when interpreting differences between commuter groups.

For a full sample breakdown, please refer to Appendix A.

Notes for interpretation

The quantitative results in this report are shown as percentages, and any differences noted between sub-groups are statistically significant at the 95% level unless stated otherwise. In some cases, differences that appear in the data may not be statistically significant due to sample size limitations. Questions with base sizes lower than 50 are marked with an asterisk (*) and should be treated as indicative findings.

Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding, the exclusion of ‘don’t know’ or ‘prefer not to say’ responses, or because respondents were able to select more than one answer.

"Nets" (or "netted answers") refer to combined multiple response options into a single summary category. This is done to provide a clearer overview of how many respondents selected similar answers and to help highlight broader patterns within grouped responses, rather than reporting each option separately. In addition, nets may overlap, meaning respondents can be allocated to more than one net category if they selected multiple relevant answers. This overlap should be kept in mind when interpreting the findings, as the totals for nets may exceed 100% and individuals may be represented in more than one group.

Identifying “commuter students”

In England, there is no single universally accepted method for identifying commuter student. Institutions and sector organisations commonly use address-based criteria, such as whether a student lives in their parental home or has the same home and term-time address. These measures are readily available in administrative data, but do not account for the distance or time involved in travelling to the place of study. An address-based measure may therefore include students who live at home within walking distance of campus, while excluding students who live independently but make long or complex journeys.

The analysis compares four commonly used measures of commuting: travel time, travel cost, term-time address and living arrangement. The purpose was to examine how effectively different measures distinguish between students with differing experiences.

- Journey time: Time-based commuters are students with a one-way journey of 45 minutes or more to their main place of study, or one hour or more for students living in London (reflecting longer typical journey times in the capital). Travel time is derived from question A2: 'Thinking about a typical day when you travel in, about how long does your one-way journey usually take from where you are staying to your main place of study? Please include walking, waiting and changing between transport.'
- Travel costs: Cost-based commuters are defined as those spending £20 or more per week on travel (question C1: ‘About how much do you usually spend on travel to and from your place of study in a typical week during term time? Please include public transport, fuel, parking and other regular travel costs’).
- Residence: Address-based commuters are defined as those living in their parental home or at the same address as before starting their course (questions L1: ‘During term time, what type of accommodation do you mainly live in?’ and L3: ‘Is your term-time address the same as your home address before you started your course?’).
- Living arrangements: Living arrangement-based commuters are defined as those who do not live with other students (question L2: ‘And who do you mainly live with during term time?’).

Each of these measures of commuting were tested individually and in combination (for example, time- and cost-based commuters satisfy both measures’ criteria as set out above) to help us understand how they impact student experiences. These combinations are used to explore how different measures of commuting interact. They should not be interpreted as separate or alternative definitions of a commuter student. For more details, please refer to the Comparing Measures of Commuter Students section.

Other characteristics, including employment, caring responsibilities, disability, sex and study level, are associated with variation in student experience but were not incorporated into our analytical framework. These characteristics are not features of the journey or living arrangement itself. Using them to define commuter status would risk conflating the circumstances that may intensify the effects of commuting with commuting itself. Self-identification as a commuter has also been considered and is discussed in the Comparing Measures of Commuter Students section.

Defining and measuring “impact on student experience”

Impact of commuting on student experience was calculated from the answers given at E1: ‘In the current term, how often has your journey to campus or living arrangements contributed to any of the following?’:

- I missed submission deadlines
- I was unable to access facilities (e.g. labs, library, equipment) outside of timetabled hours
- I was too tired from travel to prepare properly for taught sessions
- I had difficulty participating in group work or group assignments
- I missed or arrived late to a timetabled session

- I missed or was unable to attend academic office hours, drop-ins or other academic support
- I missed or was unable to attend student welfare support sessions
- I decided not to go to campus on a day when I had planned university activities
- I spent less time on campus than I wanted to
- I was unable to participate in societies, clubs or other social activities

Answer options translated into the High-None impact scale the following way:

Impact scale	E1 answer options
High	Very or fairly often
Moderate	Sometimes
Low	Rarely or at least once
None	Never
Uncertain	Not applicable

Defining and measuring "withdrawal risk"

Impact of commuting on risk of dropping out of university was calculated from the answers given at CR2: 'To what extent have the following contributed to you considering leaving your course?':

- Your journey to your place of study
- Your living situation during term time

Answer options translated into the High-None impact scale the following way:

Impact scale	CR2 answer options
High	To a great extent
Moderate	To some extent
Low	To a small extent
None	Not at all
Uncertain	Not sure

Baseline profiling

Background and circumstances

The demographic profiles of commuters in this study are broadly similar across all four measures. Differences in age, sex, financial situation, socio-economic grade, widening participation indicators and employment between measures are generally small and not statistically significant. Ethnicity shows slightly more variation than other characteristics. The largest difference is observed for travel time, where students with shorter journeys are more likely to be white (70%) than students with longer journeys (56%).

Caring responsibilities show the most consistent pattern. Across all four measures, commuters are significantly more likely than non-commuters to have regular caring responsibilities (22% vs 13% for time, 21% vs 10% for address, 23% vs 7% for living arrangement, and 22% vs 15% for cost).

Free school meal eligibility shows a significant gap for the time-based, address-based and living arrangement-based measures, but not for cost (36% vs 30%, 38% vs 24%, and 36% vs 26%, respectively). Meeting at least one widening participation indicator[2] shows a significant gap for the address-based, living arrangement-based and cost-based measures, but not for time (43% vs 29%, 42% vs 32%, and 43% vs 37%, respectively). Paid work and perceived financial situation do not differ significantly between commuters and non-commuters on any of the four measures.

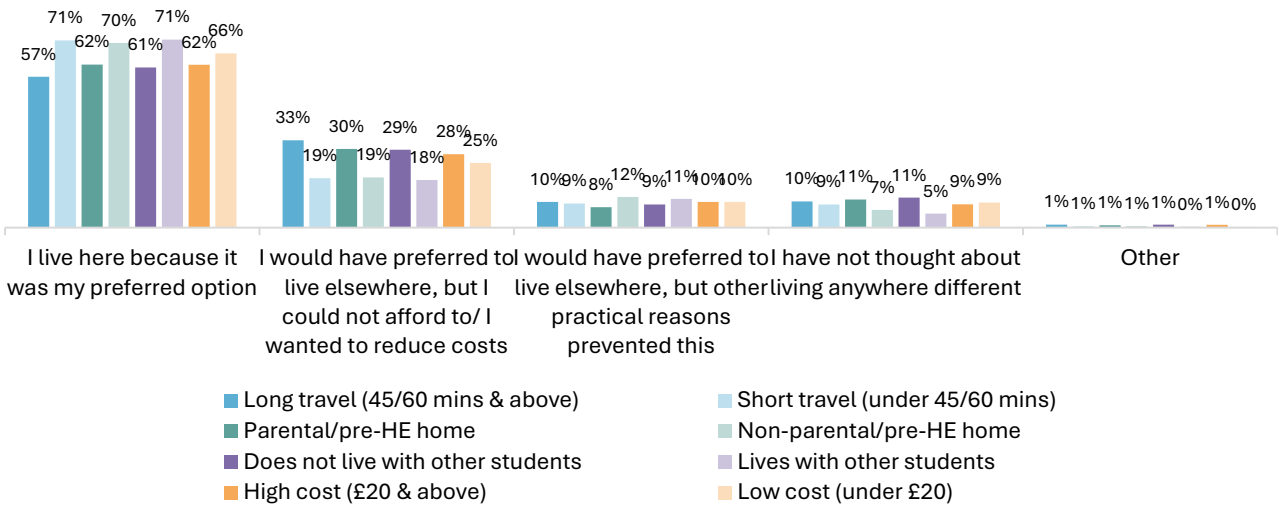
[2] This research tested free school meal eligibility, young carer status and care experience as widening participation indicators.

Living arrangements

Around a third of students across each commuter group (28-33%) say they would have preferred to live elsewhere but could not afford to move or wanted to reduce costs. Living arrangement-based commuters are significantly more likely to say this than students who live with other students. Time-based and address-based commuters are significantly more likely than non-commuters to say that they would have preferred to live elsewhere but couldn't afford to.

Staying close to home was more important to address-based commuters (76%, compared with 34% of non-commuters) and living arrangement-based commuters (75% vs 36%) than to time or cost-based commuters (71% vs 53%, and 69% vs 57% respectively). This further indicates that the different measures capture overlapping but distinct characteristics.

Figure 2. Reasons for living where they currently live by commuter measures



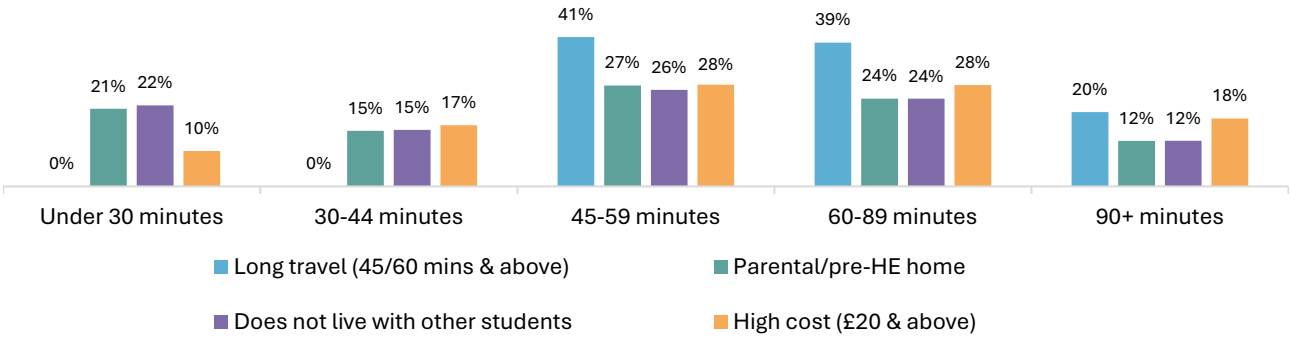
Source: OfS Commuter student research. R1. Which of the following best describes why you live where you currently live during term time? Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Travel arrangements and cost

Time-based measures almost exclusively identify students with long journeys, whereas address-based and living arrangement-based measures include substantial numbers of students with relatively short journeys. 39 per cent of time-based commuters travel for between 45 and 59 minutes to their place of study, and 39 per cent travel for between 60 and 89 minutes. 20 per cent of time-based commuters travel in excess of 90 minutes to their place of study. 36 per cent of address-based commuters travel for less than 45 minutes to their place of study.

Among the commuter groups living arrangement-based commuters have the shortest journeys on average, with 37% travelling under 45 minutes, followed closely by address-based commuters (36%). Cost-based commuters are the least likely of these groups to have shorter journeys, with only 26% travelling under 45 minutes. This suggests that travel cost is more closely associated with journey length than address or living arrangement.

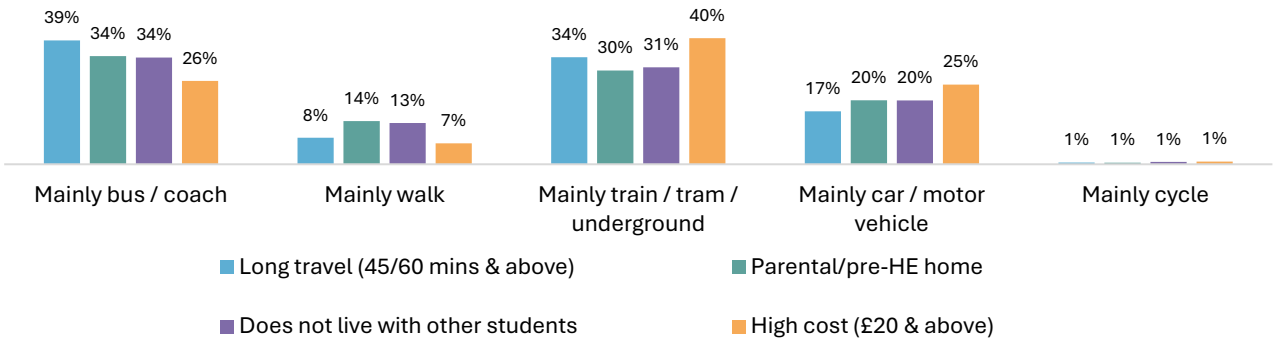
Figure 3. Travel time by commuter measures



Source: OfS Commuter student research. A2. Thinking about a typical day when you travel in, about how long does your one-way journey usually take from where you are staying to your main place of study? Please include walking, waiting and changing between transport. Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Does not live with other students (714), High cost £20 and above (368).

Address-based commuters are the most likely of the four groups to walk to their place of study (14% compared with 8% of time-based commuters, a significant difference within the commuter group), indicating that living in a parental or pre-higher education home does not necessarily involve a long or complex journey. Bus or coach travel is the most common mode of transport for time-based, address-based and living arrangement-based commuters (34%-39%). Cost-based commuters stand out with a different transport profile. Train, tram or underground travel is their most common mode (40%, significantly higher than 17% of the lower cost comparison group), and they are also the most likely of the four groups to travel by car (25%). The cost based measure disproportionately identifies students using more expensive forms of transport, particularly rail travel, rather than simply students making longer or more frequent versions of the same journeys.

Figure 4. Main mode of travel by commuter measures



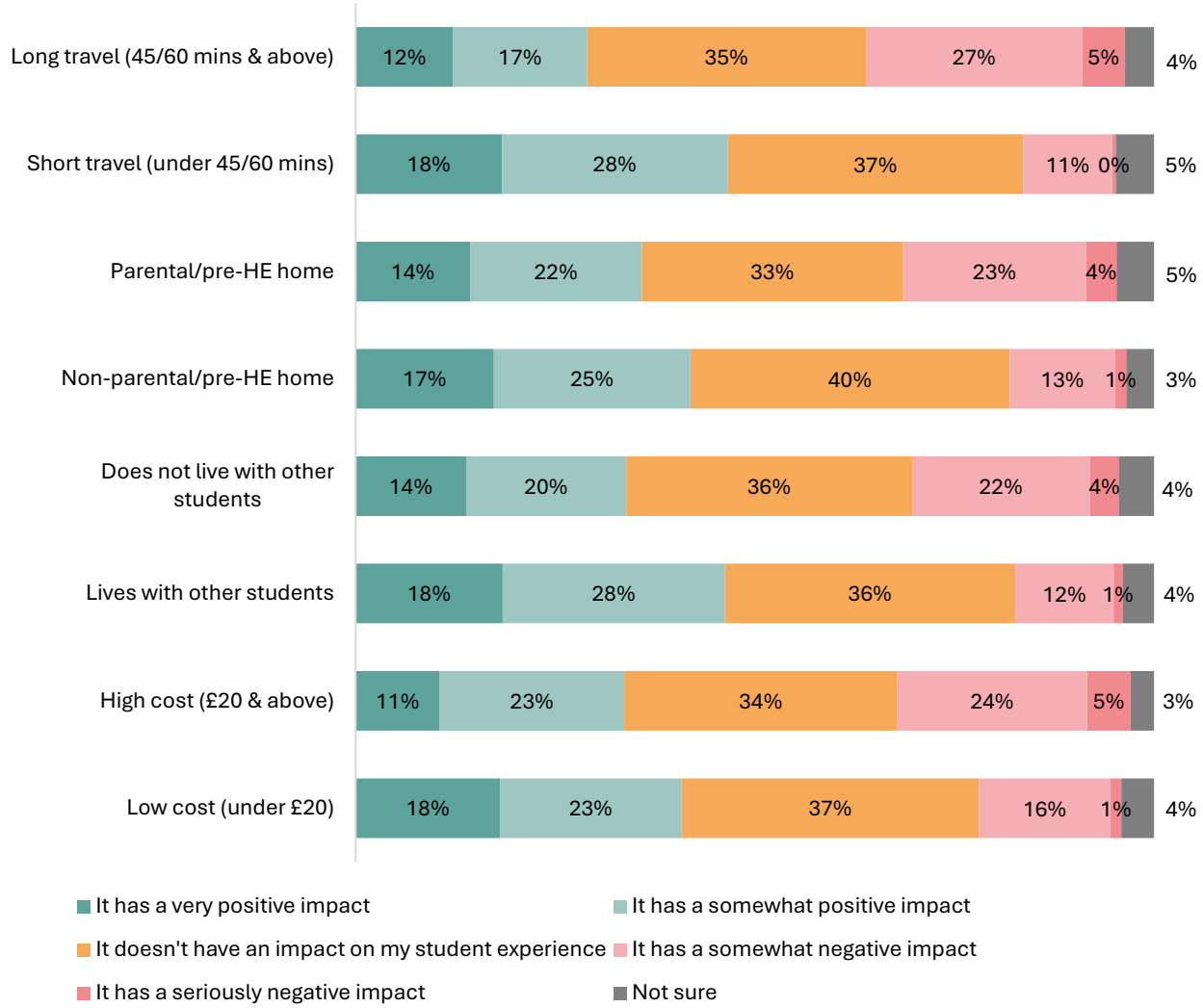
Source: OfS Commuter student research. A3. Thinking about the longest part of your journey, which of the following best describes your usual main mode of travel to your place of study? Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Does not live with other students (714), High cost £20 and above (368).

Commuting impact on student experience

Self-reported overall impact on student experience

When asked directly about the overall effect of their commute, students with journey times over 45 minutes (60 minutes in London) are significantly more likely than those with shorter journeys to report a negative impact on their student experience (32% compared with 12%). This represents the largest gap between commuters and non-commuters across any of the four measures examined in this study. Negative impacts are also more commonly reported by students living in their parental home, those who do not live with other students, and those with higher travel costs, than by their respective comparison groups (27% vs 15% for the address-based measure, 26% vs 13% for the living arrangement measure, and 29% vs 18% for the cost-based measure). However, these differences are smaller than those observed for travel time.

Figure 5. Self-reported impact of current commute to university/ college on student experience by commuter measures



Source: OfS Commuter student research. E5. Overall, what impact do the following have on your student experience? "Your current commute to university/ college". Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Living arrangements have a weaker and more variable relationship with student experience than the commute itself. Nearly two in five students (37%-39%) say their living arrangement has no impact on their student experience, and around one in five (19%-22%) say it has a negative impact. Differences between commuter groups are generally limited.

Overall, students living with their parents or in their parental home are more likely to report a negative than a positive impact, while students living independently or with other students more often describe positive experiences. This helps explain why living arrangement is a weaker predictor of student experience than journey time. Different living arrangements can be associated with both advantages and disadvantages.

Figure 6. Self-reported impact of current living arrangements on student experience by commuter measures

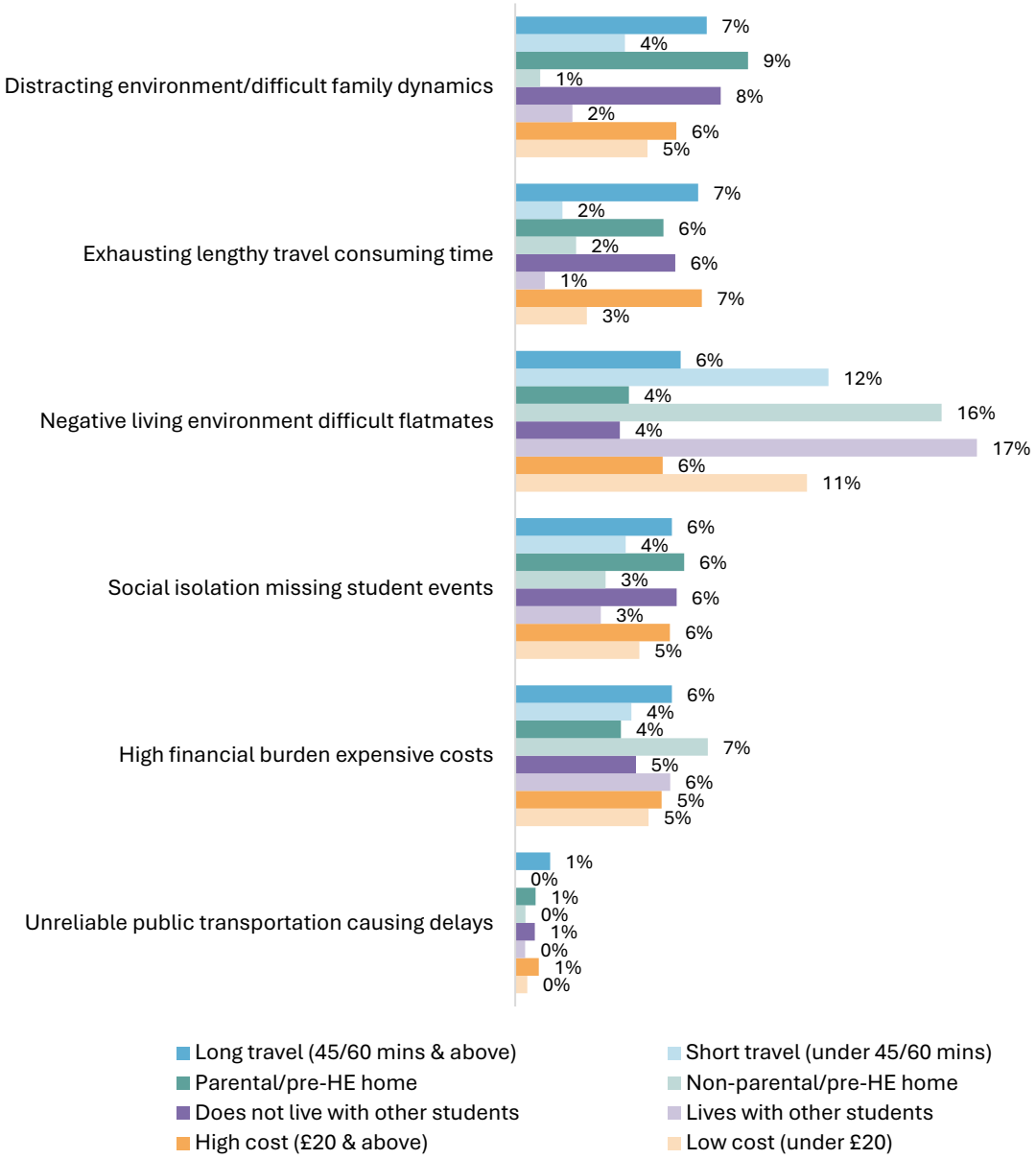
Source: OfS Commuter student research. E5. Overall, what impact do the following have on your student experience? "Your current living arrangement". Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Among students who report positive impacts from their living situation, this is often attributed to a supportive home environment, positive relationships with others and having independent space to focus on studying.

The reported negative impacts of commuter students' living arrangements were more spread out, but the most commonly reported impacts include a negative environment distracting them from their studies, and lengthy commutes.

Commuting impacts are more consistently linked to journey length and travel demands, whereas the impact of living arrangement is more varied and relates instead to the different benefits and challenges of home, rented or student accommodation.

Figure 7. Reported negative impacts of students' living situations



Source: OfS Commuter student research. In the previous question, you said your current living situation has a negative impact on your student experience. Can you explain why you gave this answer?". Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Time on campus and participation in university/college life

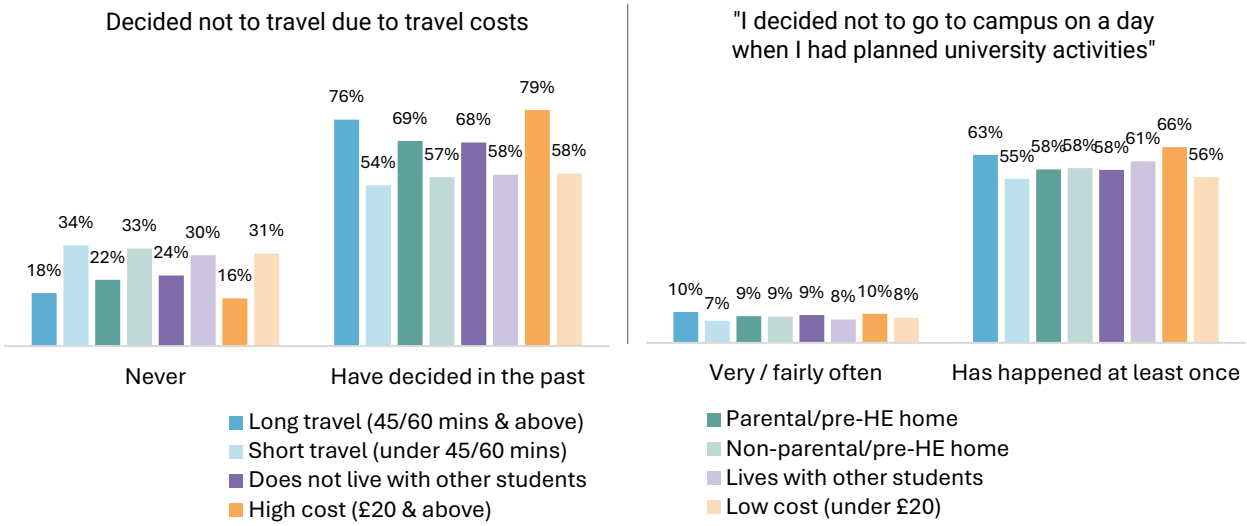
Commuting costs and journey demands reduce the amount of time some students spend on campus and can discourage attendance altogether. The clearest pattern observable in the survey data is that students with longer journeys and higher travel costs are more likely than their comparison groups to report cutting short their time on campus, missing planned activities, or deciding not to travel because of cost.

Students with longer journey times spend less time on campus. Seven in ten students travelling 45 minutes or longer report this at least once during the term (71%), compared with 59% of those with shorter journeys. The same reported impact is seen among students with high travel costs (71%), compared with 62% of students with low travel costs. Address-based commuters are the least likely of the commuter groups to report spending less time on campus than intended (66%).

Deciding not to travel to campus because of cost is also common across all measures, especially among students with longer or more expensive journeys. Three quarters of students with longer journeys report doing this at least once during the current academic year (76%), compared with 54% of those with shorter journeys. The equivalent figures are 79% among students with higher travel costs and 58% among students with lower travel costs. This suggests that commuting costs can act as a direct barrier to participation, preventing some students from attending activities in which they had intended to take part.

Missing planned campus activities because of commuting pressures is also relatively common. Students with high travel costs are most likely to report this happening at least once during the current term (66%), followed by students with longer journeys (63%) and address-based commuters (58%). Around one in ten students say this happens very or fairly often across measures.

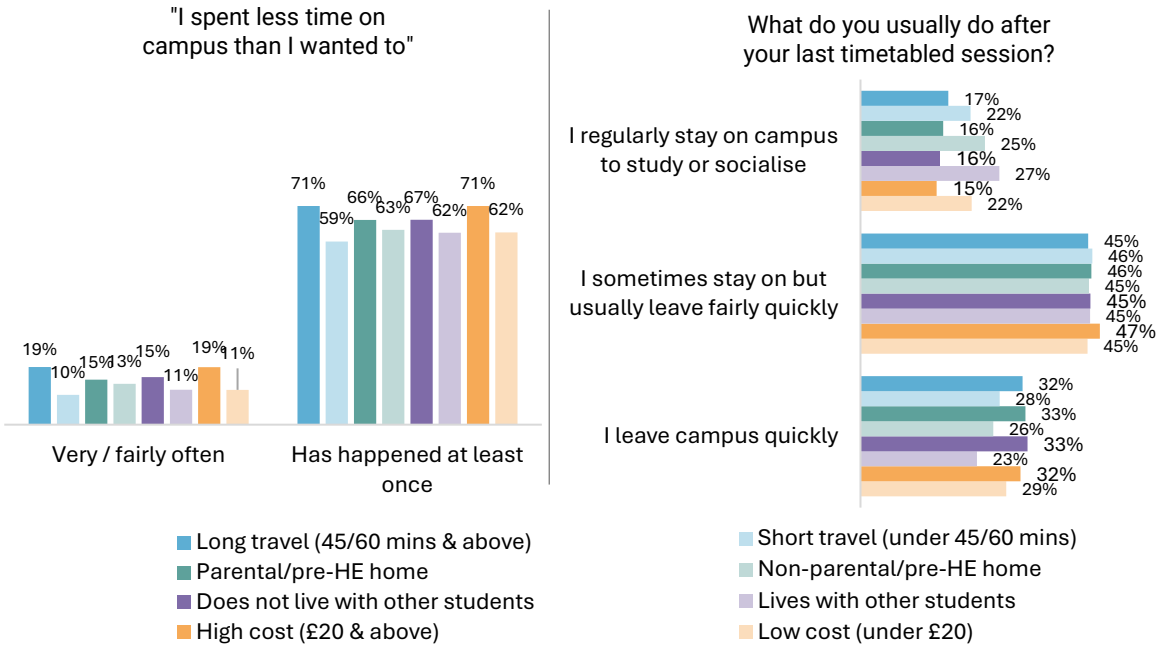
Figure 8 & 9. Decided not to travel to campus for university or college activities due to cost of travel & decided not to attend on a day they had planned to by commuter measures



Source: OfS Commuter student research. C2. In the current academic year, how often have you decided not to travel to campus for university or college activities because of the costs of travel?. E1.8. I decided not to go to campus on a day when I had planned university activities: In the current term, how often has your journey to campus or living arrangements contributed to any of the following? Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Differences between commuters and non-commuters in behaviour after the final timetabled session are less pronounced. This suggests that the stronger finding is not that commuters leave immediately after class, but that travel demands and costs can reduce the time students are able to spend on campus overall. Students who do not live with other students, and students with high travel costs, are significantly less likely to report that they regularly stay on campus to study or socialise, compared with their comparator groups.

Figure 10 & 11. Time on campus and behaviour after class by commuter measures

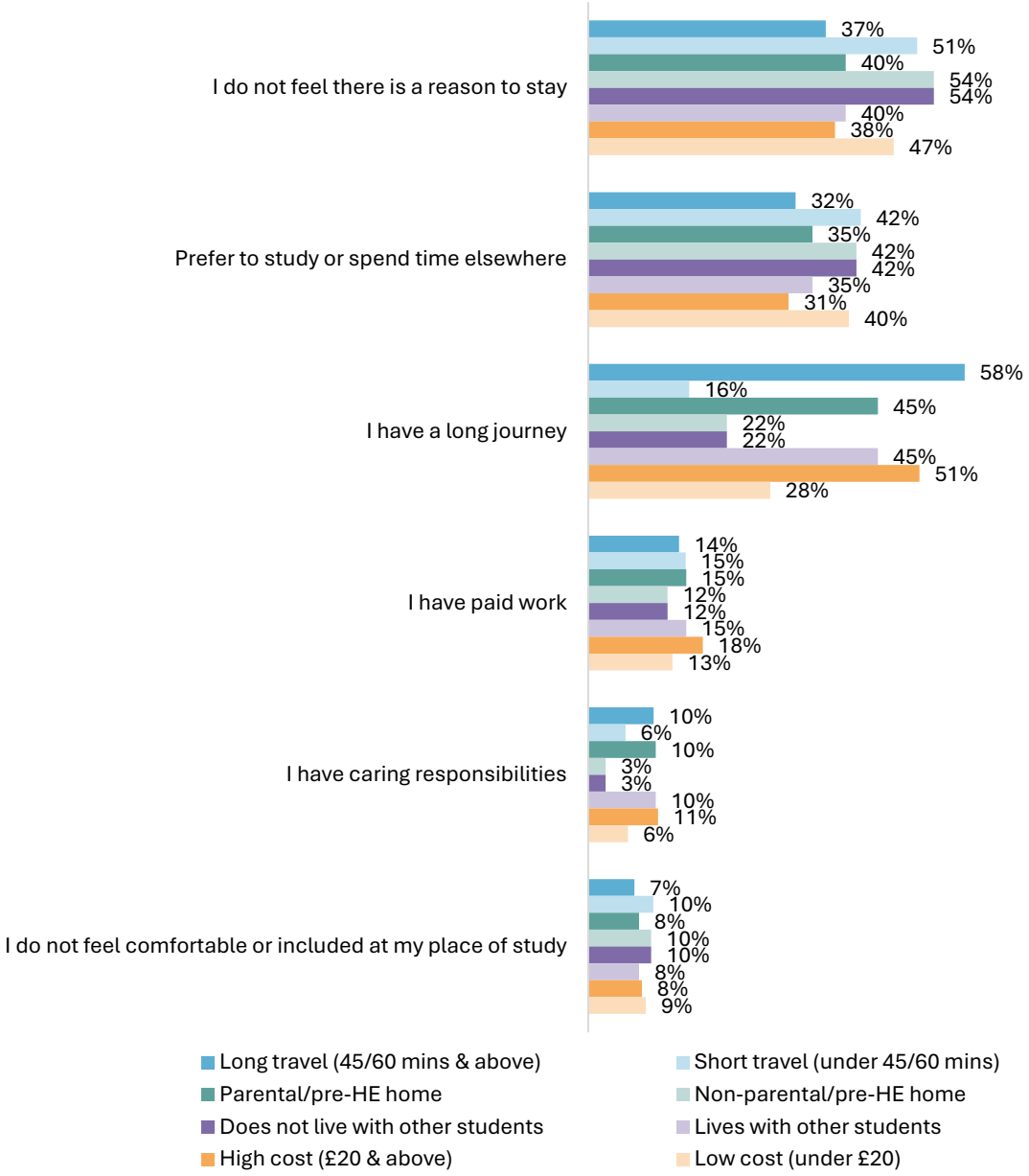


Source: OfS Commuter student research. E1.9. In the current term, how often has your journey to campus or living arrangements contributed to the following: I spent less time on campus than I wanted to. E2. On days when you attend your university or college, what do you usually do after your last timetabled session?. Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Among students who leave campus quickly, journey length is the most commonly given reason. Students with a long journey (58%) are significantly more likely to cite this than those with a short journey (16%), the largest gap of the four measures. Address-based, living arrangement-based and cost-based commuters are also significantly more likely than their non-commuter comparators to point to journey length as a reason for leaving quickly (45% vs 22%, 44% vs 22%, and 51% vs 28%, respectively).

While “I do not feel there is a reason to stay” is the second most commonly cited reason for leaving quickly among commuters, it is nevertheless given significantly less often by commuters than by non-commuters across all four measures (37% vs 51% for travel time, 40% vs 54% for address, 42% vs 50% for living arrangement, and 38% vs 47% for cost).

Figure 12. Reason for leaving place of study quickly by commuter measures

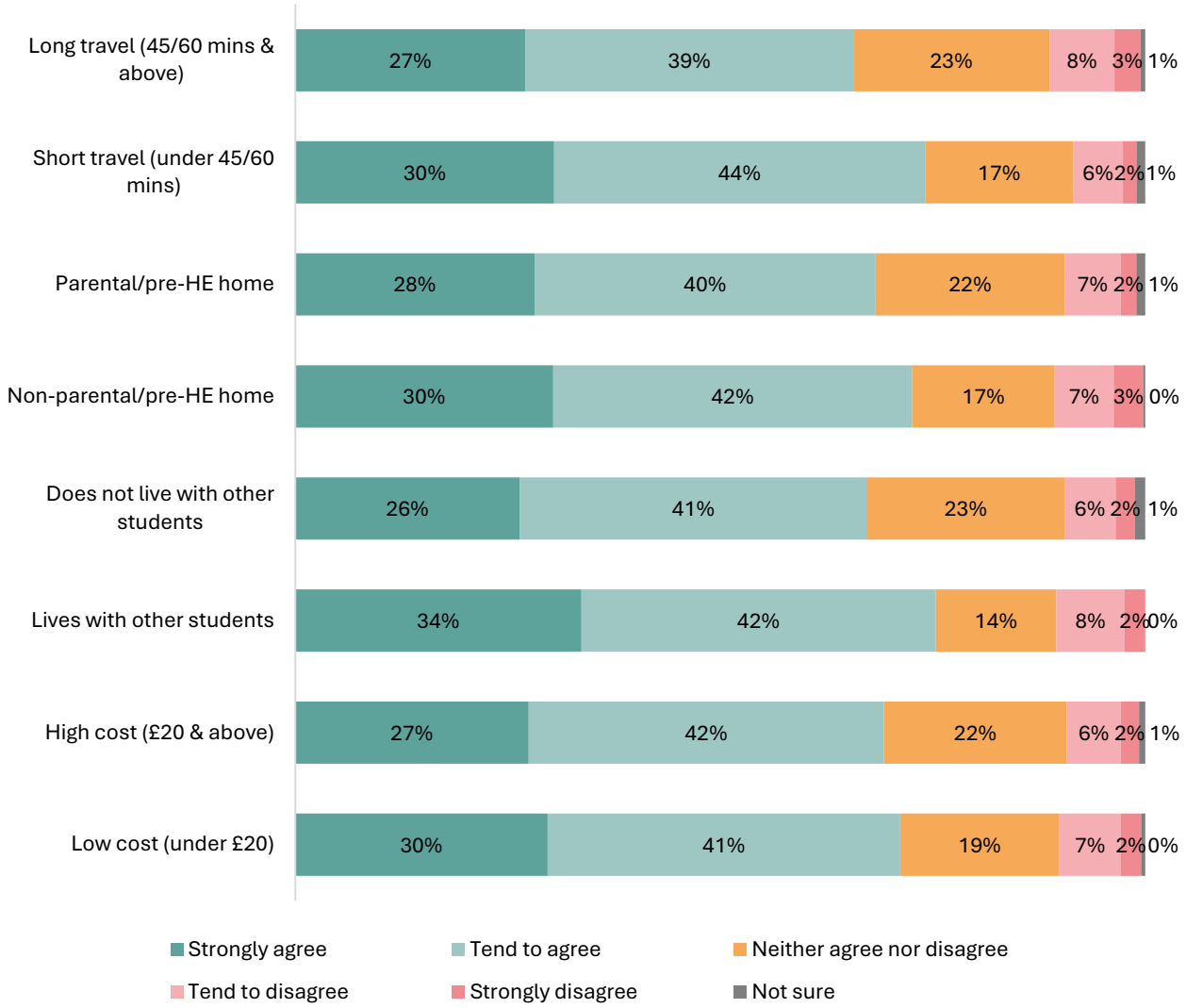


Source: OfS Commuter student research. E3. Why do you usually leave your place of study quickly after your last timetabled session? Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Sense of belonging and wellbeing

Interestingly, most students across the measures say they feel that they belong at their place of study. However, time-based commuters (66%) are significantly less likely than those with shorter journeys (74%) to agree that they belong, and a similar pattern is evident for students not living with other students compared with those living with other students (67% vs 75%). There is no significant difference between address and cost-based commuters and their comparator groups. This suggesting that belonging is more closely associated with journey length and living arrangement, than with address or travel cost alone.

Figure 13. Sense of belonging by commuter measures

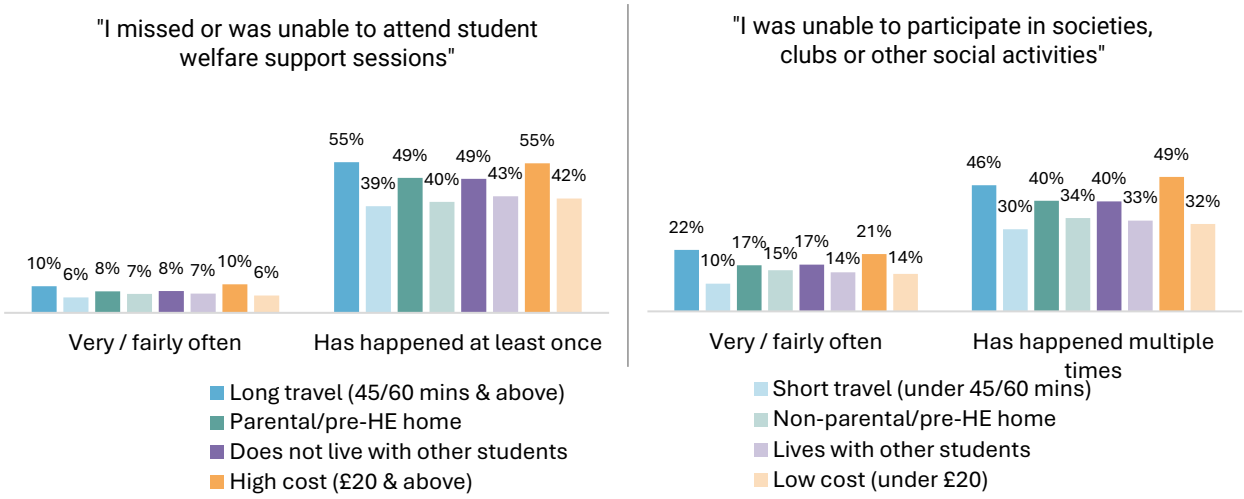


Source: OfS Commuter student research. E4_1. I feel that I belong at my university / college: How far do you agree or disagree with the following statement?. Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

While differences in belonging are clear but relatively modest, substantially larger differences are observed in social participation and access to support. Students with longer journeys, those living in their parental or pre-higher education home, and those with higher travel costs are more likely than their counterpart groups to have missed or been unable to attend student welfare support at least once during the current term. This suggests that commuting can create practical barriers to accessing support.

Commuter students are also more likely to report difficulties participating in clubs, societies and other social activities. This is significantly more common among students with a longer journey time (67% vs 51%), those living without other students (61% vs 54%), and those with high travel costs (69% vs 53%) compared with their counterpart groups. Address-based commuters are the only group that shows no significant difference (61% vs 56%). This suggests that travel time, living arrangement and cost have a greater bearing on social participation than address alone.

Figures 14 & 15. Missed welfare support and social activities by commuter measures



Source: OfS Commuter student research. E1.7. I missed or was unable to attend student welfare support sessions: In the current term, how often has your journey to campus or living arrangements contributed to any of the following?. E1.10. I was unable to participate in societies, clubs or other social activities: In the current term, how often has your journey to campus or living arrangements contributed to any of the following. Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Calculated overall impact on student experience

The calculated impact[3] of the journey to campus or living arrangements on student experience is highest among students with longer journeys and higher travel costs. Looking across the single measures, travel time creates the clearest distinction: 49% of students with shorter journeys experience at least some calculated negative impact, compared with 68% of those with longer journeys. Students with high travel costs are also more likely than those with low-travel costs to experience at least some impact (66% vs 54%). Differences by address and living arrangement are present but smaller.

Figure 16. Impact of journey to campus or living arrangements on student experience by commuter measures

	Long travel (45/60 mins & above)	Short travel (under 45/60 mins)	Parental /pre-HE home	Non-parental/ pre-HE home	Does not live with other students	Lives with other students	High cost (£20 & above)	Low cost (under £20)
High	15%	6%	11%	10%	12%	9%	13%	10%
Moderate	34%	24%	31%	24%	30%	27%	34%	26%
Low	19%	19%	20%	18%	20%	17%	19%	18%
None	30%	47%	35%	46%	36%	46%	32%	43%

Source: OfS Commuter student research. Calculated impact on student experience. Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Impact increases progressively as journey length increases, supporting the conclusion that the relationship is graded rather than driven by a single threshold. The proportion experiencing a high impact increases from 6% among students travelling less than 30 minutes to 22% for those travelling for 90 minutes or more. Over the same range, the proportion experiencing no impact falls from 51% to 25%.

[3] The method of calculation is discussed on page 5.

Figure 17. Impact of journey to campus or living arrangements on student experience by travel time

	Under 30 minutes	30–44 minutes	45–59 minutes	60–89 minutes	90+ minutes
High	6%	6%	10%	18%	22%
Moderate	22%	28%	37%	31%	31%
Low	17%	21%	21%	18%	20%
None	51%	43%	32%	31%	25%

Source: OfS Commuter student research. Calculated impact on student experience. A2. Thinking about a typical day when you travel in, about how long does your one-way journey usually take from where you are staying to your main place of study? Please include walking, waiting and changing between transport. Base: Under 30 minutes (361), 30-44 minutes (158), 45-59 minutes (238), 60-89 minutes (205), 90+ minutes (106).

Impact on student experience generally increases as weekly travel spend rises. Among students spending nothing or less than £10 a week, 7% report a high impact, compared with 17% of those spending £40 to £59. Over the same range, the proportion reporting no impact dips from 47% to 21%. However, this pattern does not extend to the highest spending group. This group is based on a relatively small sample size and should therefore be treated as indicative. While the figures appear closer to the lowest-spend group than to those spending £40 to £59, this may reflect the small base size or differences in the circumstances of students with the highest travel costs, rather than a clear reversal of the overall pattern.

Figure 18. Impact of journey to campus or living arrangements on student experience by travel cost

	Nothing/ less than £10	£10-£19	£20-39	£40-59	£60 or more
High	7%	13%	12%	17%	9%
Moderate	24%	30%	37%	33%	21%
Low	18%	19%	16%	25%	24%
None	47%	38%	34%	21%	43%

Source: OfS Commuter student research. Calculated impact on student experience. C1. About how much do you usually spend on travel to and from your place of study in a typical week during term time? Please include public transport, fuel, parking and other regular travel costs. Base: Nothing / less than £10 (378), £10-£19 (284), £20-£39 (234), £40-£59 (98), £60 or more (42).

Academic impact of commuting

Commuters report a range of academic difficulties arising from their journey or living arrangements, and many of these difficulties are more common among students meeting the commuting measures than among their counterpart groups.

Around three quarters of time-based commuters report being too tired from travel to prepare properly for a taught session, compared with 59% of non-commuters. Address-based and cost-based commuters show the same pattern (71% vs 62%, and 72% vs 65%). Living arrangements do not appear to affect this measure. Missing or arriving late to a timetabled session follows a similar pattern among time and cost-based commuters (82% vs 69%, and 80% vs 73%), but address and living arrangements do not appear to increase the likelihood of missing timetabled sessions.

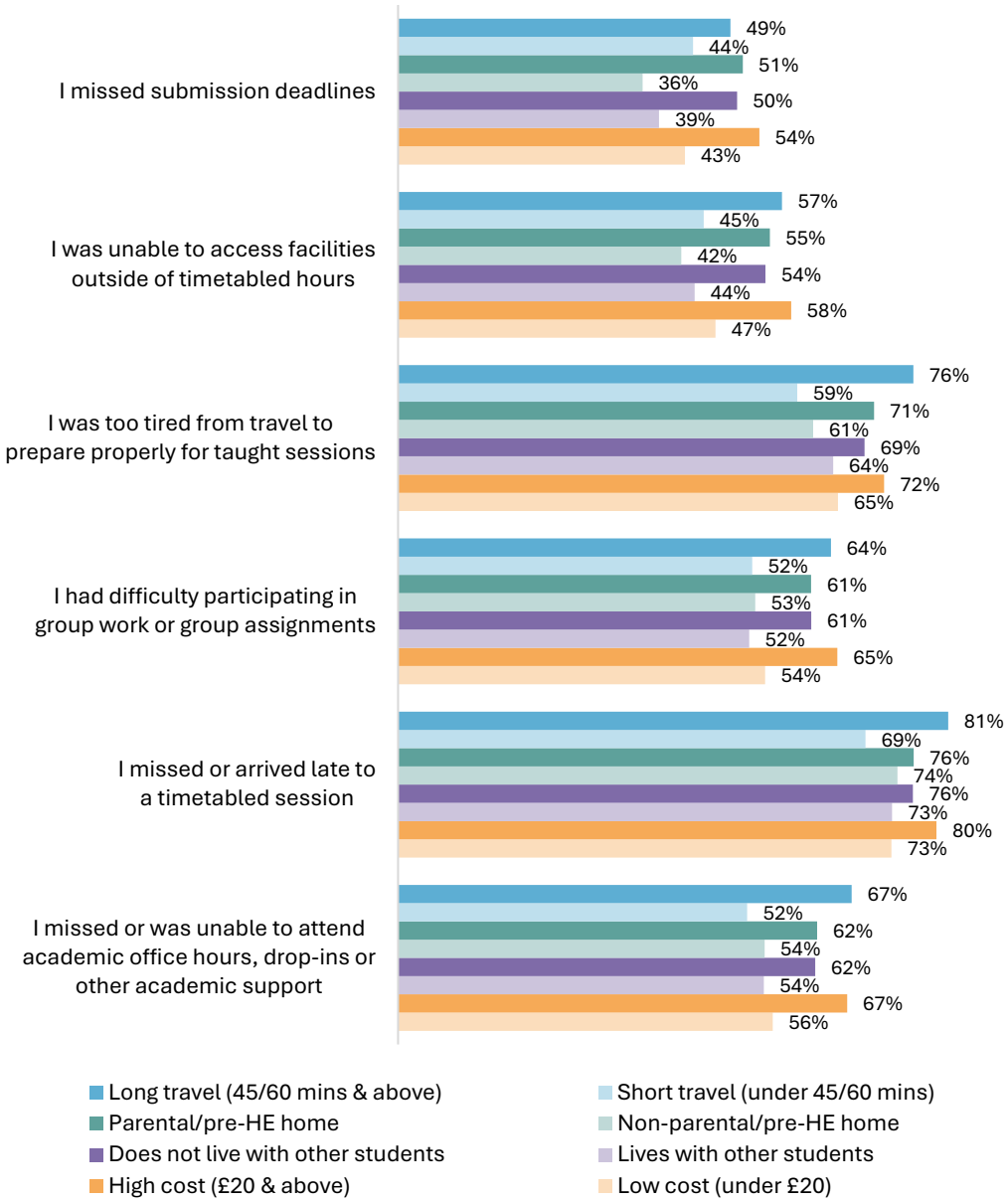
All four commuter groups are significantly more likely than their non-commuter counterparts to report several other academic difficulties. These include:

- being unable to access facilities outside timetabled hours (57% vs 45% for time-based; 55% vs 42% for address-based; 54% vs 44% for living arrangement-based; 58% vs 47% for cost-based);
- having difficulty participating in group work (64% vs 53% for time-based; 61% vs 53% for address-based; 61% vs 52% for living arrangement-based; 65% vs 54% for cost-based); and
- missing academic office hours, drop-ins or other academic support (67% versus 52% for time; 62% vs 54% for address-based; 62% vs 54% for living arrangement-based; 67% vs 56% for cost-based).

Missing a submission deadline is the exception: while address, living arrangement and cost-based commuters are all significantly more likely to have missed a submission deadline than their comparator groups (51% vs 36%, 50% vs 39%, and 54% vs 43%), travel time has a more modest impact (49% vs 44%).

This suggests that different measures are capturing groups of students who experience forms of academic disruption. Tiredness and lateness are most consistently linked to travel time and cost. Difficulty accessing facilities, group work and academic support are significant across all four measures. This indicates that some academic challenges are closely tied to the practical demands of travelling, while others reflect broader barriers experienced by commuters regardless of how they are identified.

Figure 19. Impact of commuting on academic experience by feature of commuting (Has happened at least once)



Source: OfS Commuter student research. E1. In the current term, how often has your journey to campus or living arrangements contributed to any of the following? Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Commuting impact on risk of withdrawal from studies

Consideration of dropping out

While around a quarter of commuters across the four measures have considered leaving their course, the difference is statistically significant for time-based. Students with a longer journey are more likely than those with shorter journey times to have considered leaving (27% vs 22%), and to identify their journey as contributing to those thoughts (62% vs 42%).

Calculated overall impact on withdrawal risk

While commuters overall tend to have a higher calculated withdrawal risk[4] than non-commuters, students with a long journey and those with high travel costs are significantly more likely to fall into the high-risk category than their non-commuter counterparts (20% vs 13%, and 20% vs 14%, respectively).
The relationship between commuting and withdrawal risk is clearest when students are grouped by travel time or travel cost, while address and living arrangement show much weaker differences. At the other end of the scale, time-based, address-based and cost-based commuters are all significantly less likely than non-commuters to report no calculated withdrawal risk at all. Living arrangement is again the exception, with no significant difference.

Withdrawal risk becomes more pronounced as journey time increases, mirroring the pattern observed throughout the report for overall student experience, participation and access. The proportion classified as high withdrawal risk rises from 12% of students travelling for under 30 minutes, to 26% of those travelling for 90 minutes or more. Conversely, the proportion reporting no impact falls from 46% to 26%.

Figure 20. Risk of withdrawal from place of study by travel time

	Under 30 minutes	30–44 minutes	45–59 minutes	60–89 minutes	90+ minutes
High	12%	15%	16%	21%	26%
Moderate	23%	28%	28%	26%	34%
Low	18%	20%	23%	19%	13%
None	46%	36%	32%	32%	26%

Source: OfS Commuter student research. Calculated risk of withdrawal. A2. Thinking about a typical day when you travel in, about how long does your one-way journey usually take from where you are staying to your main place of study? Please include walking, waiting and changing between transport. Base: Under 30 minutes (361), 30-44 minutes (158), 45-59 minutes (238), 60-89 minutes (205), 90+ minutes (106).

Risk associated with withdrawal is also highest among students spending £40 to £59 per week on travel. Nearly a quarter of this group (23%) are at high risk, compared with 13% of those spending nothing or less than £10 per week. However, students spending £60 or more do not follow the same pattern although this group is based on a small number of respondents and the findings should therefore be treated with caution.

[4] The method of calculation is discussed on page 6.

Figure 21. Risk of withdrawal from place of study by travel cost

	Nothing/ less than £10	£10-£19	£20-39	£40-59	£60 or more
High	13%	17%	20%	23%	17%
Moderate	21%	31%	30%	34%	14%
Low	19%	18%	18%	18%	26%
None	45%	33%	32%	23%	43%

Source: OfS Commuter student research. Calculated risk of withdrawal. C1. About how much do you usually spend on travel to and from your place of study in a typical week during term time? Please include public transport, fuel, parking and other regular travel costs. Base: Nothing / less than £10 (378), £10-£19 (284), £20-£39 (234), £40-£59 (98), £60 or more (42*low sample size).

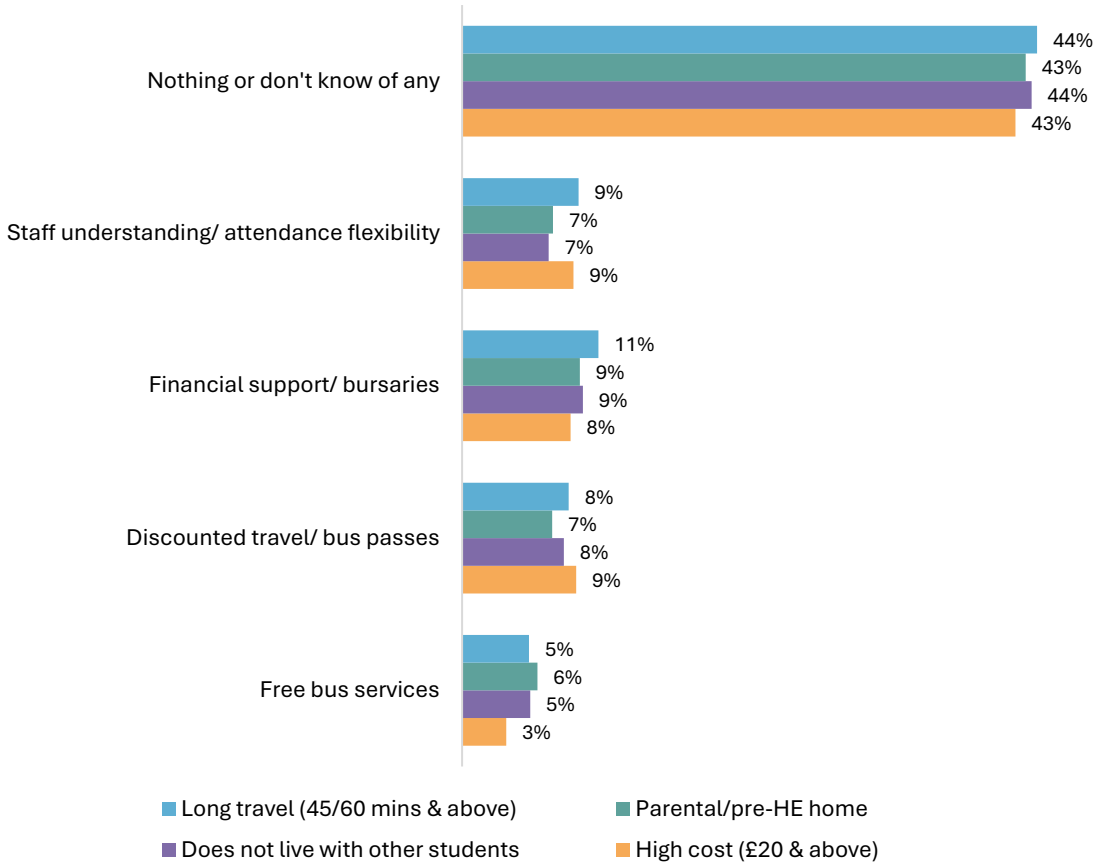
Supporting commuters

Institutional support: current provisions and needs

Across the commuter groups, students consistently said that their universities or colleges could do more to support them with travel. Around two in five (43%) time-based commuters rate their institution as supporting them well, while around one in five (21%) rate support as poor. Differences between commuter groups are relatively limited, and no group is substantially more likely than others to rate institutional support positively.

When asked what their institution currently does well, more than two in five across each commuter measure either say that it does nothing or that they are unable to identify any existing support. Among those who identified support, the forms of support mentioned varied considerably. This suggests that support is either not consistently available across providers or not consistently visible to students.

Figure 22. Things universities / colleges are doing well to support commuters by commuter measures (top 5)

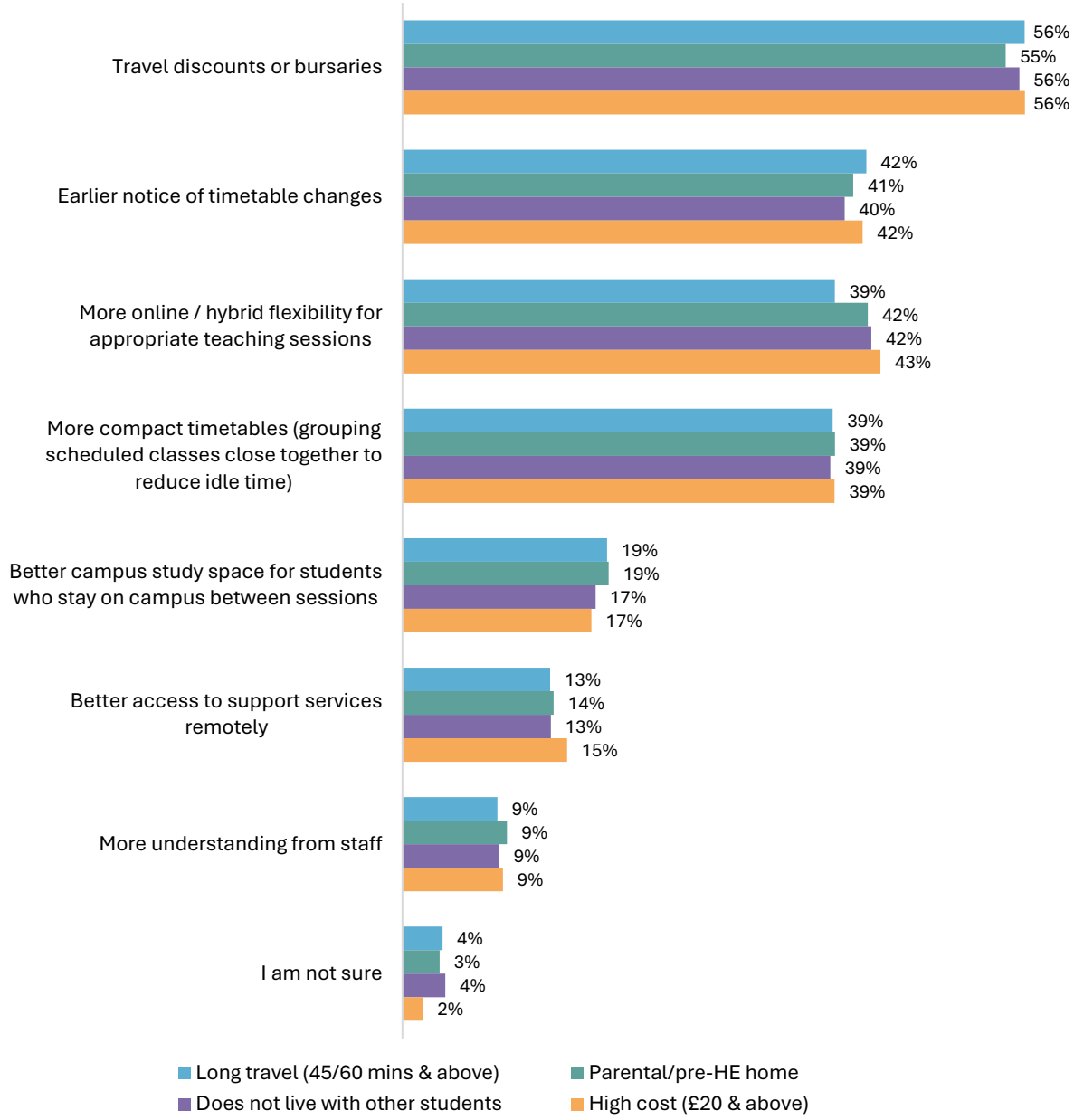


Source: OfS Commuter student research. Is there anything that you feel your university is already doing well with regards to how they support your travel to campus? Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Does not live with other students (714), High cost £20 and above (368).

Travel discounts or bursaries are the improvement most commonly selected as likely to make a positive difference. This is consistent with earlier findings showing that travel costs influence attendance decisions, time spent on campus and overall student experience. However, students with high travel costs are not substantially more likely than other commuters to select financial support, suggesting that financial pressures are not determined solely by the cost of travel, but also by wider personal and financial circumstances.

Earlier notice of timetable changes, greater online or hybrid flexibility and more compact timetables are also commonly selected, each by around two in five commuters (39%-46%, with no significant difference between measures), suggesting that commuters tend to value greater flexibility regardless of how they travel.

Figure 23. Support that would make the biggest difference to commuters by commuter measures



Source: OfS Commuter student research. P1. Which of the following would make the biggest positive difference to you as a student who travels in? Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Does not live with other students (714), High cost £20 and above (368).

Comparing measures of commuter students

Comparison of commuter definitions by time, address, living arrangement and cost

This report examines different commonly used measures of commuting – travel time, address, living arrangements and travel cost – to understand how different approaches to identifying commuter students relate to student experience. This section brings together the evidence presented throughout the report to compare how well each measure identifies students whose experience is shaped by commuting.

This final analysis uses two measures of negative impact:

- Self-reported negative impact: the proportion saying that their current commute has an overall negative impact on their student experience.
- Calculated negative impact: the proportion experiencing at least one of the ten measured outcomes included in the calculated impact scale.

Travel time produces the largest difference on both measures making it the strongest individual indicator of negative impacts on student experience. Almost a third of students with longer journeys report an overall negative impact from their commute (32%), compared with 12% of those with shorter journeys. Similarly, 68% of longer-travel students experience at least some calculated negative impact, compared with 49% of shorter-travel students.

Differences are also evident by address, living arrangement and cost, but these measures distinguish between students' experiences less clearly than travel time. Students living in their parental or pre-higher education home, students not living with other students, and students spending at least £20 per week on travel are more likely than their respective comparison groups to report negative experiences.

However, the differences associated with these characteristics are smaller than those associated with journey time.

Figure 24. Negative impact on student experience by time, address, living arrangement and cost

		Self-reported negative impact	Calculated negative impact
Travel time	Short travel (under 45/60 mins)	12%	49%
	Long travel (45/60 mins & above)	32%	68%
Address	Non-parental/pre-HE home	15%	52%
	Parental/pre-HE home	27%	62%
Living arrangement	Lives with other students	13%	53%
	Does not live with other students	26%	61%
Cost	Low cost (under £20)	18%	54%
	High cost (£20 & above)	29%	66%

Source: OfS Commuter student research. Calculated impact on student experience. E5. Overall, what impact does your current commute to university or college have on your student experience? A2. Thinking about a typical day when you travel in, about how long does your one-way journey usually take from where you are staying to your main place of study? L1. During term time, what type of accommodation do you mainly live in? L2. Who do you mainly live with during term time? L3. Is your term-time address the same as your home address before you started your course? C1. About how much do you usually spend on travel in a typical week during term time? Base: Long travel: 45/60 mins & above (524), Short travel: under 45/60 mins (545), Parental/pre-HE home (663), Non-parental/pre-HE home (363), Does not live with other students (714), Lives with other students (355), High cost £20 and above (368), Low cost under £20 (669).

Combining measures helps identify students who experience multiple commuting-related challenges at the same time, such as long journeys alongside high travel costs or constrained living arrangements. The highest levels of self-reported negative impact are found among students who have a long journey and also live in their parental or pre-higher education home, do not live with other students, or have higher weekly travel costs.

However, the increase compared with long journey time alone is relatively modest. For example, 32% of all long-travel students report a negative overall impact, compared with 34% of long-travel students living in their parental or pre-higher education home.

A similar pattern is evident in the calculated measure. Negative impact is reported by 68% of all long-travel students, compared with 69% of those who also live in their parental or pre-higher education home and 70% of those who also have higher travel costs.

This indicates that overlapping characteristics provide useful context, but journey time remains the strongest individual distinction in the data. More broadly, the findings suggest that measures based on journey characteristics, particularly travel time and to a lesser extent travel cost, distinguish differences in

student experience more clearly than measures based on residential circumstances. Address and living arrangement remain important, but primarily as indicators of the circumstances in which commuting is experienced rather than as strong predictors of student experience in their own right.

Self-identification as commuters

Students were asked whether they personally thought of themselves as commuter students. Self-identification varies depending on the measures used. Two thirds of time-based commuters identify as commuters (66%), compared with 59% of address-based commuters. Self-identification is somewhat higher where multiple characteristics overlap, but remains far from universal. This suggest that students' own understanding of commuter status does not align neatly with any single measure used in this study.

Self-identification increases as the level of impact on student experience rise. Two thirds of students experiencing a high level of impact identify as commuters (66%), compared with 41% of those experiencing no impact. Nevertheless, a third of students experiencing a high impact either do not identify as commuters or remain uncertain. Self-identification alone would therefore miss a substantial minority of students whose journeys or living arrangements have a significant impact on their experiences.

Figure 25. Commuter self-identification by overall impact on student experience

	High	Moderate	Low	None
Identifies as commuter	66%	56%	48%	41%
Does not identify as commuter	17%	20%	31%	37%
Uncertain	17%	24%	21%	22%

Source: OfS Commuter student research. L4. Do you think of yourself as a commuter student? Calculated impact on student experience. Base: High impact (115), Moderate impact (309), Low impact (201), No impact (417).

Conclusions

This research set out to build a clearer understanding of commuter students by examining the impact of four features of the commuter experience: travel time, travel cost, address and living arrangement. These measures identify overlapping but distinct groups of students and should not be treated as interchangeable definitions of commuter students.

The findings show that travel time is associated with the clearest and most consistent differences in student experience. Students travelling for 45 minutes or more are more likely than those with shorter journeys to report negative impacts on their student experience, reduced time on campus, difficulties accessing academic and welfare support, and greater contribution of commuting to withdrawal risk.

The relationship is graded rather than binary. Negative outcomes become more common and more severe as journey length increases, with the greatest impact generally seen among students travelling for 90 minutes or more.

Address-based definitions identify a broader and more varied group of students, including many whose journeys are relatively short. This does not mean that address is unimportant, but suggests that it may be best understood as helping to explain the context in which commuting is experienced.

Travel time and, to a lesser extent, travel cost appear to distinguish differences in student experience more clearly than address or living arrangement. Address and living arrangement remain important for understanding the circumstances in which commuting is experienced.

Living arrangement and travel cost help to further explain the circumstances in which commuting occurs. Cost appears to intensify some commuting-related challenges. Living arrangement helps explain students' access to informal support and campus life. However, differences between combined groups are often modest, suggesting that the distinction between commuter types may be less important than the underlying characteristics of journey time and, to a lesser extent, travel cost.

The findings also show that commuting is often shaped by financial and circumstantial pressures. Around a third of students meeting the commuting measures say they would have preferred to live elsewhere but could not afford to or wanted to reduce costs. Caring responsibilities are also more common among students meeting the commuting measures. This suggests that commuting is frequently connected to wider responsibilities and constraints.

Commuting is associated with differences in both belonging and participation. Whilst a majority of commuter students say they feel they belong at their institution, those with longer and more costly journeys were less likely that their counterparts to agree that they belonged to their institution. However, clearer differences could be seen in practical access: spending time on campus, attending timetabled sessions, accessing support, participating in societies and social activities, and remaining on campus outside teaching hours.

Self-identification does not reliably capture affected students. Although students experiencing high levels of impact are more likely to identify as commuters, a substantial minority do not identify as commuters or are uncertain. Relying on self-identification alone would therefore miss some students whose journeys or living arrangements have a significant effect on their experience.

The practical implications are clear. Many commuters cannot identify visible support from their institution, and the support they most commonly ask for is practical rather than social. Travel discounts or bursaries, earlier notice of timetable changes, more compact timetables and greater online or hybrid flexibility are the changes most likely to help.

Overall, the research suggests that journey time provides the clearest primary measure for identifying students whose experiences are affected by commuting. Address, living arrangement and travel cost might be best thought of as useful contextual measures that help explain students' circumstances and needs.
These measures cannot remove the underlying cost or duration of a commute. However, they can reduce the extent to which commuting restricts students' ability to attend, prepare, access support and participate in wider university life.

Appendices

Appendix A

	Total	Commuters	Non-commuters
Total	**1,069**	**524**	**545**
Age			
16-20	50%	49%	53%
21-24	30%	29%	31%
25+	20%	22%	16%
Sex			
Female	63%	69%	55%
Male	36%	31%	44%
Ethnicity			
Asian	16%	19%	14%
Black	12%	13%	9%
Mixed	6%	5%	5%
White	63%	61%	70%
Other	2%	2%	3%
Socio-economic grade			
ABC1	72%	72%	75%
C2DE	28%	28%	25%
Study level			
Undergraduate	67%	69%	70%
Postgraduate	20%	22%	19%
Other	13%	9%	11%
Study mode			
Full-time	86%	87%	90%
Part-time	14%	13%	10%
Region			
North	31%	31%	32%
Midlands	30%	28%	32%
East	6%	6%	7%
South (excl. London)	20%	18%	24%
London	19%	23%	12%
Provider tariff[5]			
High tariff	23%	22%	29%
Medium tariff	25%	26%	27%
Low or unknown tariff	28%	29%	26%
Large level 4/5	7%	6%	3%
Small level 4/5	3%	4%	2%
Specialist: Creative	3%	3%	3%
Specialist: Other	2%	1%	3%

[5] The OfS provider tariff refers to a system used to categorise and group higher education providers in England based on factors like student entry points, student characteristics, and financial attributes.