



# Commuter Students



# Necessity vs Choice Commuters

This session will explore the difference between necessity and choice commuter students at Royal Holloway. It will also discuss ways we can better support and engage with these students to increase their sense of belonging within academic and student communities.

# Background

The coronavirus pandemic and cost-of-living crisis has driven a rise in commuter students across the sector.

We know commuter students are less engaged, more financially constrained, exhausted and more likely to have lower degree outcomes compared to campus students.

Despite knowing this, universities and students' unions struggle to create good policies and activities to better support this community.

Part of the problem is we are still framing students' decisions to commute as a *choice* rather than a *necessity*. Acknowledging the difference is the first step to better understanding their experience and making improvements at Royal Holloway.



# Financial Barriers Campus vs Commuters by Choice vs Commuters by Necessity

- In the 2024 Blackbullion Student Money & Wellbeing Report, students who identified as commuters were asked, 'Is this by choice or necessity?'
- 319 students identified as commuters by choice and 234 by necessity.
- In the report, non-commuter students needed about £577 a month *more* than what they currently have.
- Commuters by choice needed £671 more than what they currently have.
- Commuters by necessity needed £782 more than what they currently had.
- They did not repeat this exercise in the 2025 report, but commuters need £396 more than what they currently have compared to £345 for non-commuters.

# Commuters at Royal Holloway

# Commuter Definition

There is no sector-wide definition of a commuter student.

Some definitions consider the distance or time taken to travel.

At Royal Holloway, the University uses two different datasets with a different definition to get a more rounded picture of the commuter experience.

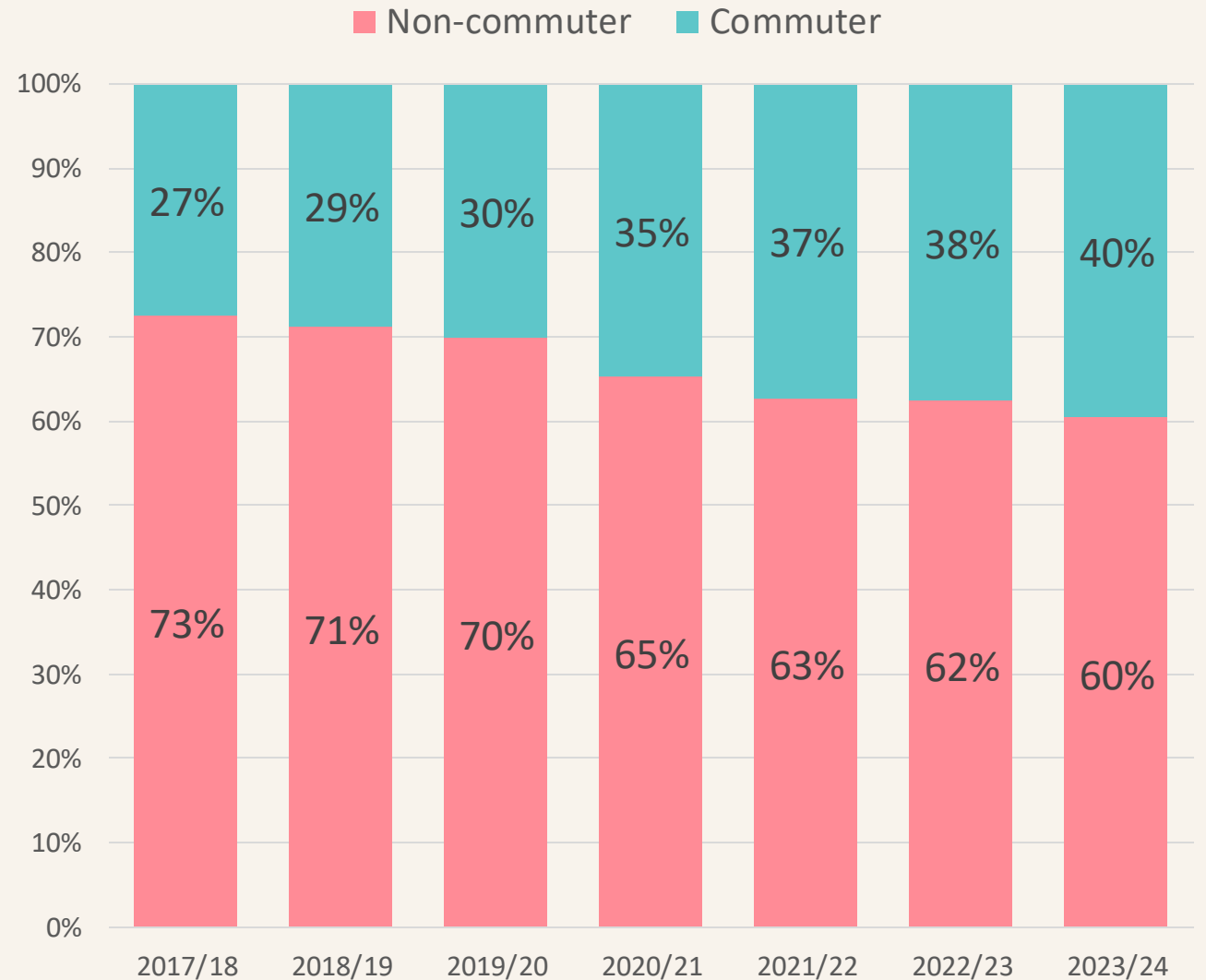
1. RH Student Count dashboard – this is based on distance and defines a commuter student as an individual with a term-time postcode between 3-50km from campus
2. Online sign-up data – this is provided by students at the start of each academic year and provides self-declared information on the method of travel and the journey time to campus

# Commuter Growth

Royal Holloway's commuter cohort has increased year on year.

Between 2017/18 and 2023/24 numbers grew from 27% to 40% of the total cohort (all levels of study).

This represents an extra 2,178 commuter students on campus compared to 2017/18 (2,831 increasing to 5,009).





# RHUL Demographics

The proportion of commuter students from different demographic groups varies considerably:

- Students from deprived areas are more likely to commute than those from affluent areas
- Students from Asian (50%) , Black (55%) and other ethnic groups (56%) are more likely to commute than those from White (29%) or Mixed groups (37%).
- Those who are in the first generation to attend HE are more likely to commute than those with parental experience of HE (48% compared to 33%)
- Those from Sikh or Muslim religious backgrounds are much more likely (71% and 62% respectively) to commute than those from other religious groups or with no religion

# RHUL Enrolment Insights

The proportion of commuter students also varies across different levels of study, Academic Schools and year of study:

- UG students in their first year of study are less likely to commute (36%) than in subsequent years.
  - This matched data we collected in our research.
- 30% of Foundation Year students commute during their first year of study
- Alongside this, first year UG students are much more likely (59%) to live in halls than UG students as a whole (25%) or all students in general (22%)
- Students from the School of Business and Management are almost twice as likely to commute compared with those from the School of Performing and Digital Arts (49% compared to 25%)



# **Commuter Student Policy Inquiry Findings**

## Term One Survey

**Necessity: 58%**

**Choice: 39%**

**Prefer not to  
say: 3%**

**STUDENT LEADER CONFERENCE**

## Term Two Survey

**Necessity: 65%**

**Choice: 30%**

**Prefer not to  
say: 5%**

# Survey says...

This year we are running a year-long Policy Inquiry which looks at the commuter student experience over the course of an academic year. At the start of each survey, we asked students to identify what type of commuter student they were at Royal Holloway.

### Participant numbers:

654 respondents, Term One survey

366 respondents, Term Two survey

12 participants, paid in-person focus group

7 participants, paid journal activity

# Why students commute

## Financial reasons:

- Accommodation is too expensive
- Cheaper to travel
- Can save money
- No Maintenance Loan

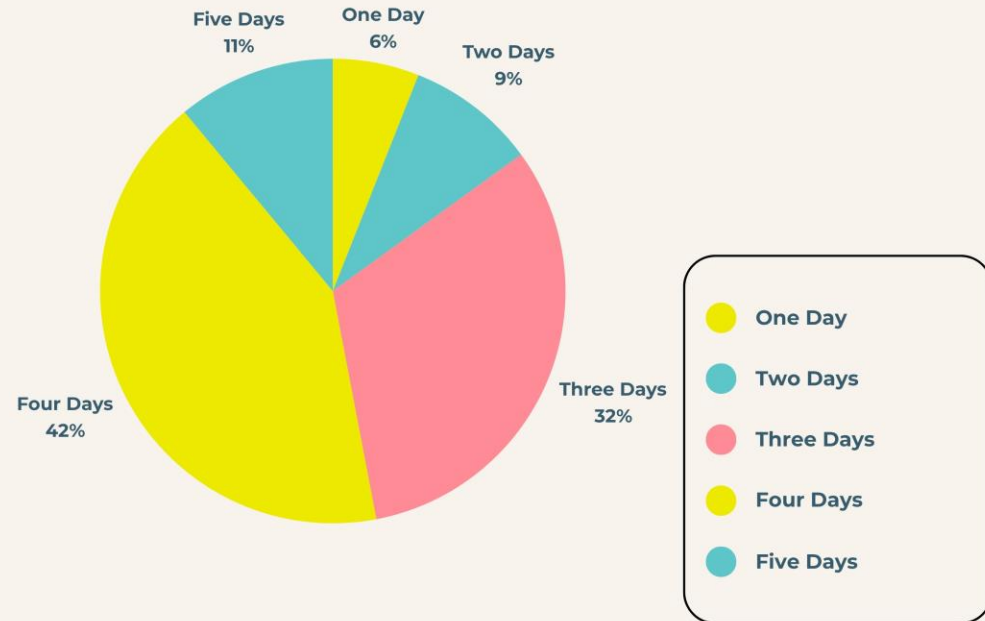
## Location

- Lives close to RHUL and can't justify the cost of paying rent.
- Transport links

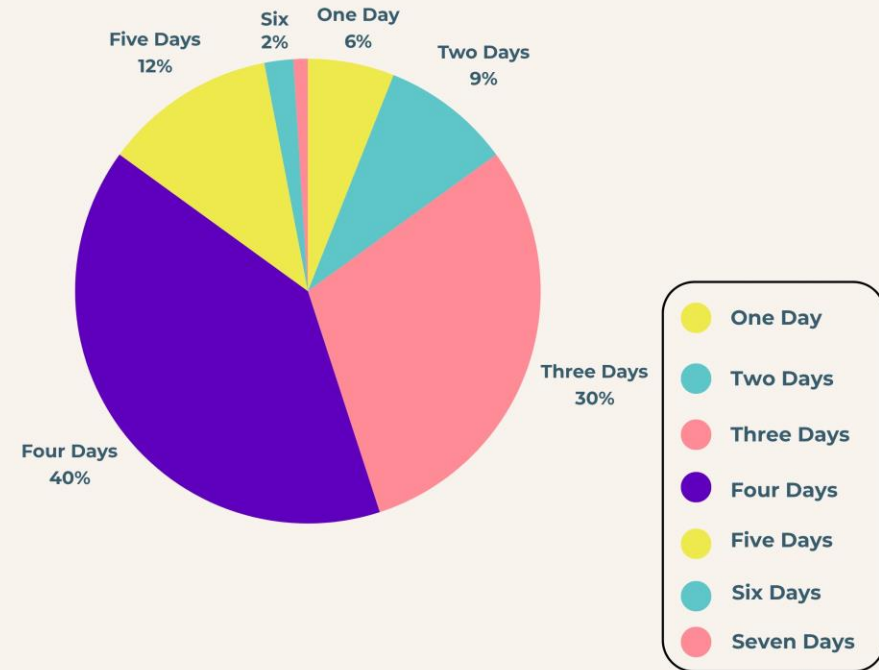
## Other

- Family responsibilities
- Wants to live at home
- Lived on campus in earlier years
- Had no one to live with

# Days on campus



**Scheduled teaching days**



**Days spent on campus during term**

# A deeper look at days on campus

72% of respondents come to campus only on the days they have teaching

17% of respondents come to campus more days than they have teaching. Within this group 63% of these students were commuters by necessity vs 33% by choice.

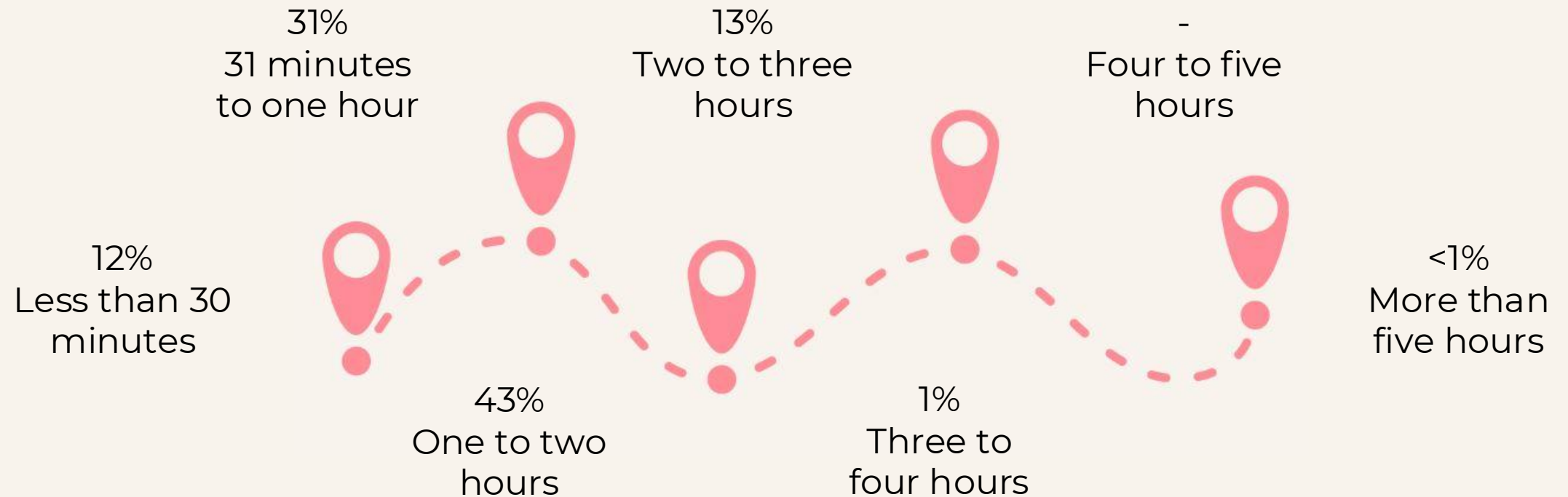
11% of respondents come to campus less days than they have teaching. Within this group it's an even split.



# Average Commute Times

Top Three Forms  
of transport:

1. Train
2. Car
3. Bus







# **Commute impact on the RHUL Student Experience**

# Commute Impact on Student Experience

**Does your commute impact your ability to socialise with other students on campus?**

Term One:

52% Yes

37% Sometimes

11% No

Term Two:

58% Yes

33% Sometimes

9% No

**Does your commute have an impact on your physical or mental health while studying?**

Term One:

29% Yes

41% Sometimes

30% No

Term Two:

39% Yes

40% Sometimes

21% No

**Has your commute had an impact on your ability to attend lectures, seminars, participate in group work and or assessments?**

Term One:

52% Yes

31% Sometimes

17% No

# How often do you feel lonely?

## Term One Survey

**8% Always**

**23% Often**

**40% Sometimes**

**23% Rarely**

**6% Never**

## Term Two Survey

**7% Always**

**28% Often**

**39% Sometimes**

**20% Rarely**

**6% Never**

# Belonging & Community

## In Term One

- 50% agreed to an extent that they feel a part of their academic community within their department.
- 59% agree to an extent that they have had opportunities to form new friendships and foster a sense of belonging within the RHUL student community.

## In Term Two

- 46% agreed to an extent that they feel a part of their academic community within their department.
- 58% agree to an extent that they have had opportunities to form new friendships and foster a sense of belonging within the RHUL student community.

Term One: 55% of commuters by choice feel part of an academic community compared to 48% of commuters by necessity.

Term Two: 55% of commuters by choice feel part of an academic community compared to 42% of commuters by necessity.

Term One: 67% of commuters by choice feel they have had opportunities to form new friendships and foster a sense of belonging compared to 55% of commuters by necessity.

Term Two: 72% of commuters by choice feel they have had opportunities to form new friendships and foster a sense of belonging compared to 53% of commuters by necessity.



**Academic  
Community**



**Belonging**



# A deeper look at Belonging



# Barriers to Belonging & Community

- Managing studies was a major barrier which impacted daytime socialisation for commuter students. 85 per cent of choice commuters stated they found their workload manageable versus 72 per cent of necessity commuters in Term One.
- A high proportion of respondents indicated they manage their workload, but they compensate by studying during their commutes or teaching breaks, limiting their time to socialise.
- Commute time and fatigue impact ability to engage
- Work or family responsibilities
- Ability to attend daytime and evening events
- Hard to get involved
- Lack of time



# Where they spend time on campus

79% Study space in library

24% EWD general seating

19% Other (car, outside, no breaks, cafes)

3% Tommy's Lounge

9% Student Lounge Windsor Building

9% Founders Reading Room

10% Department common room

18% A friend's room in Halls / local area

18% The Hub

# **Commuters and the Students' Union**

# Engagement

Do you know about any of the following Students' Union

SU Student Groups	56%
Academic Reps	43%
SU Advice Centre	34%
Sabbatical Officers	28%
None of the above	17%
Other Student Inclusion Communities	11%
Commuter Student Inclusion Community	10%



# Commuter Student Inclusion Community

In our Term One  
survey only 3% of  
survey respondents  
answered they were  
a member of our  
Commuter Student  
Inclusion Community

Top Reasons why  
students aren't  
members:

Didn't know about it

No Time

Don't need / want to  
join

Other reasons listed:

Not sure

Didn't know how to  
join

Another pressure /  
time commitment

PG Student

# Event Barriers Term One

Reasons commuters are not interested in our events

53% of survey respondents said they were interested in attending daytime and/or evening events

45% of comments were commute-related:

- Commute Time / Distance
- Events too late
- Only come to campus for teaching and events are additional costs
- Expensive

Lack of time was another recurring issue

- No free time for other commitments
- Use what free time they had to study or work

The events themselves were also a reason:

- Not interested in the events / not relevant
- Postgraduate status
- Unaware of the events
- Alcohol-related reasons

Other top themes:

- Would rather be home
- Friend-related reasons
- Too tired / no energy
- Feel anxious / uncomfortable attending

# Event Barriers Term Two

In our Term Two survey we asked commuters to rank common commute-barriers based on the largest impact on their ability to attend a late-night event at one of our venues. 1 was the barrier that impacted them the most and 9 impacted them the least.

Commute barriers ranked
1. Event starts / ends too late
2. Additional costs
3. Transport schedules (e.g. don't want to miss late train / bus)
4. Nowhere to stay overnight
5. Friend-related reasons
6. Lack of energy
7. No time
8. Work clash
9. Don't want an additional commute if not on campus

# Types of Events Commuters Want

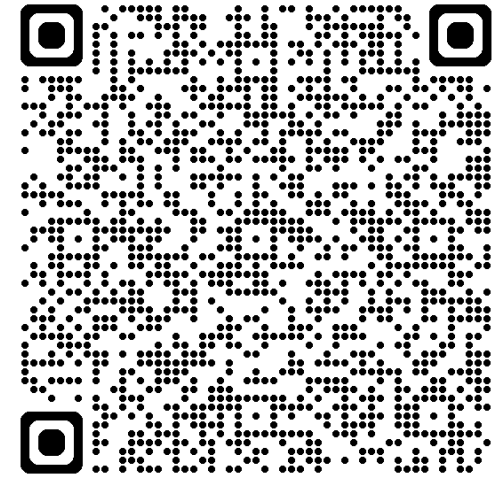
Commute-related barriers	% respondents
Coffee / cake	50%
Networking	38%
Crafting	38%
Late-afternoon / early-evening social events at one of our venues	33%
Sporting events / activities (Zumba, Kitty yoga)	32%
Larger events like Festivals of Languages and Culture	28%
Board games	26%
Daytime sport events	22%
Stressbusters during exams	21%
Daytime sports club practices	21%
I am not interested in events	21%
Campaign events during Liberation History Months	13%
Other	2%



# Questions?

# THANK YOU

Please complete this  
form to give us your  
feedback on the  
session



# THANK YOU

