

Briefing – Policy Proposal

Title: The Union should create a “Commuters’ Officer” role

Date: 23 January 2025

Audience: Welfare & Community Zone

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

UCL defines commuter students as those who “live outside university accommodation (in a private house or with their parents/guardians) and whose commute to campus takes 45 minutes or more.” It currently provides them general support services and signposts through a dedicated webpage, specifically covering resources on Academic Support, Personal Support, Financial Support, Travel Support, and links to On-Campus Facilities.¹ UCL also acknowledges that commuter students form a widening participation student group. This is due to the challenges they have identified for commuter students, such as travel time and cost, as well as the impact on attendance and access to academic, extracurricular, or social events.²

The UCL Students’ Union Policy & Research team conducted research for Wellbeing Report 2022, which identified from focus group data that commuter students “found it hard to find their place on campus”, due to travel time and cost. This has left students who commute feeling they do not have the same access to the community as other students. This report recommended that UCL explore more opportunities for on-campus storage and social study space specifically for commuting students.³ Furthermore, as of Welcome 2024, the Union has begun running commuter Speedfriending events.⁴ These specialised events allow students of particular groups to find each other as they understand each other’s circumstances.

The Union has several Sabbatical and Student Officers who address the welfare and well-being of all UCL students. In addition, specific student officer roles (such as the Women’s Officer and Research Students’ Officer) are in place to lead networks (community inclusion groups) for otherwise marginalised and underrepresented students.⁵ Due to the nature of the part-time voluntary positions, the Students’ Union encourages Student Officers to dedicate ~25 hours a term (~2 hours a week) to their elected position. In the previous academic year (23/24), the Representation and Democracy Team undertook a student officer review. One of the core aims of this review was to reduce the number of Student Officer positions.

The Union already has a Welfare & Community Officer to represent and address welfare issues, including those faced by Commuter Students. By focusing on student welfare, well-being, and mental health support within a broader framework of student support services and community engagement, this Sabbatical Officer role can address commuter students’ wellbeing concerns. In conjunction with the Equity & Inclusion Officer, the Welfare & Community Officer is expected to support Networks and general community building for the Union.

What would change if the policy was successful?

¹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/students/support-and-wellbeing-services/additional-information/specific-student-groups/commuter-students>

² <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/widening-participation/widening-participation-groups#Commuter%20Students%C2%A0>

³ <https://studentsunionucl.org/student-priorities-for-wellbeing-report-2022>

⁴ <https://studentsunionucl.org/whats-on/events-activities/commuter-speedfriending-0>

⁵ <https://studentsunionucl.org/leadership-race>

The role would engage commuter students specifically with Union activities and encourage them to feel part of the broader Union community as well as a commuter-specific community. This would be achieved through visibility of the role and potentially also through a student network. In conjunction with the Equity & Inclusion Officer.

It also aims to act as a “direct line of communication” with commuters to improve their welfare. Lastly, the role would hold voting rights within Union democratic structures like the Zones.

What is the relevant national / international context to this situation?

In January 2024, the Office for Students (OfS) identified commuter students as a group represented on their Equality of Opportunity Risk Register (EORR), which consists of the twelve risks most likely to impact students. Specifically, they identified, based on their research, that commuter students are at risk of:

- Risk 5: Limited choice of course type and delivery mode
- Risk 6: Insufficient academic support
- Risk 7: Insufficient personal support
- Risk 10: Cost pressures⁶

A pervasive issue contributing to barriers to researching commuter students’ experiences is a sector-wide disagreement on a consensus definition of ‘commuter’.⁷ The Higher Education Policy Institute has identified that 63.9% of full-time, UK domiciled, undergraduate students are living in the ‘parental/guardian home’, which means they are classed as ‘commuter students’.⁸ Meanwhile, other organisations, such as London Higher, conducting research into commuter students, also add time travelled to study as a qualifier for commuting status.⁹ This disagreement means that it is challenging to conduct a large-scale study into commuters’ experiences and their need for representation in University and general student spaces. This issue impacts how universities across the country choose to support their commuter population and has delayed support. This means universities must stick to their commuter populations in order to understand their behaviours and how they can be best supported.

For example, in April 2024, Arts SU published a report on the travel costs and behaviours of University of Arts, London (UAL) commuter students after identifying that this population was under-represented in their spaces. 5.5% of UAL students responded to the survey, identifying themselves as commuting students. These students could identify UAL-specific issues, such as transport costs, night travel, and the transportation of art projects. This information has allowed Arts SU to better understand and represent their students appropriately.¹⁰

There is a precedent of a Commuters Officer in other UK in Students’ Union structures. For example, Aston Students’ Union has a Part-Time & Commuter Students’ Officer, and students must be recognised as “Part-time by the University and/or Commute to University” to run for the role.¹¹ Herts SU has a Commuting Students’ Officer, and eligibility is specified as students living off-campus. It’s relevant to note that Herts SU has

⁶ <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/for-providers/equality-of-opportunity/equality-of-opportunity-risk-register/student-characteristics/commuter-students/>

⁷ <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-sector-is-still-often-talking-at-cross-purposes-over-commuter-students/>

⁸ https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/12/HEPI-Homeward-Bound-Defining-understanding-and-aiding-%E2%80%98commuter-students%E2%80%99-Report-11429_11_18Web.pdf

⁹ https://londonhigher.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/LondonHigher_2019_Commuter-stu-in-London-continuation.pdf

¹⁰ https://issuu.com/artstudentsunion/docs/cot_pages_9apr

¹¹ <https://www.astonsu.com/pageassets/voice/elections/autumn/Part-time-Commuter-Students-Officer-JD-v4.pdf>

opted to remove their Commuting Students' Officer, and this decision has been ratified by their executive.¹² Furthermore, Derby Union has a Commuter Students' Officer.¹³ As does Swansea SU.¹⁴ However, both positions appear vacant at this time.

The addition of commuter students to the OfS EORR, a lack of consensus on a sector-wide definition of commuting students, and the outcomes of the Arts SU research suggest that more should be done to understand commuter students' concerns and represent them at the Students' Union and University levels.

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

No.

Does this relate to any existing Union policy?

No.

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder / public relations issues with this policy proposal?

No.

Are there any sustainability implications to this policy proposal?

No.

Are there any equity and inclusion implications to this policy proposal?

Having representation for students who commute to campus to study can promote a stronger sense of community. Having an officer whose remit is to create a community within this student group could be a positive move towards including more students in activities and helping them feel like they belong.

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

The proposer would meet with the Representation and Democracy team to draft an Amendment to Governing Documents to be voted on at the Union Executive. Union Executive would also decide whether the role should be stand alone officer, or also require a Student Network in order to fulfil its duties.

As the nominations for the Leadership Race are due to open in February, the next time for this position to be elected would be during the Rep Election in October 2025.

¹² [https://hertssu.com/pageassets/your-say/elections/positions/Commuting-Students-Officer-Job-Description-2024-25\(2\).pdf#:~:text=Purpose%20of%20Role.%20The%20Commuting%20Students'%20Officer,Organisers%20and%20Student%20Reps%20to%20find%20out](https://hertssu.com/pageassets/your-say/elections/positions/Commuting-Students-Officer-Job-Description-2024-25(2).pdf#:~:text=Purpose%20of%20Role.%20The%20Commuting%20Students'%20Officer,Organisers%20and%20Student%20Reps%20to%20find%20out)

¹³ <https://www.derbyunion.co.uk/change/officers/>

¹⁴ <https://www.swansea-union.co.uk/officers/officer/commuter/>