



CITY
STUDENTS'
UNION

'Check into City'

A report on the student experience in term one 2020 based on the Union's new strategic project 'Student Check-ins'

Student Check-ins Report 2020

Executive Summary

The Student Check-Ins project is a new strategic initiative launched for term one 2020/21 by City, University of London Students' Union (the Union). When the U.K. went into lockdown in March the Union quickly reorganised and refocused its Welcome activity onto student wellbeing.

This project was conducted by student and full-time Professional Union staff as well as the sabbatical officers, with home-working spaces and our Tait Building Office being turned into call centres. The Union contacted a total of 2,531 students across the university by phone in order to offer support and collect feedback and data on which to base ongoing work for the academic year.

The main concerns communicated by students in this report are as follows:

- Unclear communications
- Uncertainty around term two and three
- Social isolation and loneliness
- Concerns with academic work and remote learning

Based on feedback, the Union has produced a number of recommendations. The Union expects to repeat and refine the project for term 2, targeting students especially affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

Recommendations

The following recommendations have been set out by the Union as a result of findings from the Student Check-ins 2020.

1. Housing and Finance

- 1.1 To convene a joint working group between the Union and University accommodation team dedicated to supporting students in housing and for this group:
 - a. To develop and offer a financial and/or other material support package for students renting in London over Christmas and contingency plan for further support in the event of future lockdowns.
 - b. To review the advertisement and administration of hardship funds, ideally offering them with full availability to all students.
- 1.2 For the University to increase promotion of its London housing advice service.

2. Communications

- 2.1 For each school, prior to the winter break, to offer all-student forums in collaboration with the Union to their cohorts to clarify students' expectations and take student questions and input in light of the developing Covid-19 environment.
- 2.2 For each school and the university centrally to produce and distribute up-to-date FAQ documents for students prior to the winter break which may be reliably referred to as part of students' expectations for the lockdown period and upcoming term.
- 2.3 For the University / schools to provide updates on their approach to Covid-19 and the coming terms with a regularity of no less than fortnightly, to be shared with students for a minimum period of 15 weeks.

3. Subsequent Terms

- 3.1 For the University / schools to produce and distribute a term two road map in collaboration with the Union, which will detail the projected dates of decisions pertinent to their educations and student experience.
- 3.2 To provide additional support at all levels and from all services to support students in gaining access to research, facilities, and resources as part of the upcoming period of dissertations and other assessments at undergraduate and postgraduate level.
- 3.3 To fully review online teaching, its platforms (Moodle, Teams, Zoom) and their fitness-for-purpose in time to improve provision for term two and to further develop in preparation for further online learning in years ahead.
 - a. To, as part of reviewing, offer students the chance to feed back on their online learning provision prior to term 2.

4. Services

- 4.1 To deliver targeted communications, promoting awareness and inviting engagement in Support Services to first years, newly arrived international and EU students, and students belonging to demographics thought to be at-higher-risk of isolation and mental illness.
- 4.2 To develop alternative-format communications such as minute-long video service overviews fit for social media use and course Moodle shells.

5. Social Connection and Community

5.1 For the Union to develop ongoing Academic Communities work in collaboration with schools to increase and improve social cohesion and a sense of community on courses and in subject-areas, particularly engaging new-starters and isolated demographics.

5.2 For schools to support a greater number of social events across term for their cohorts and host end-of-term socials with collaboration from the Union's Societies and Representation teams.

6. Student Check-ins Project

6.1 The Union to repeat the project in January:

- a. To follow up with all first years engaged in September.
- b. To target final year / returning students to see how their experience has changed since term one.
- c. To also target and prospectively contact all SHS placement students, EU students, and students in halls in term 2.

6.2 The Union to repeat the project on an annual basis.

Overview

The Student Check-In project ran over three weeks from 5-23 October at the start of the 2020-21 academic year. The Union contacted 2,531 students by phone in order to gauge student opinion and maximise direct one-to-one contact with students at a time of great uncertainty and unease.

The project had the following aims:

- To ensure students were informed about key services.
- To engage with students, offer a sense of community and support from the Union, and welcome students to the university in place of an on-site welcome.
- To identify areas of concern and improve the Union's delivery to accommodate students' expectations.

A team of full-time staff and student staff were fully trained and delivered the project. The calls to students were handled based on a bespoke script which was internally developed in consultation with key support service stakeholders and covered the following areas:

- Accommodation: halls; private rented; living at home; home-owned
- Registering with a GP
- Visa check-in
- Finances and money
- Wellbeing support: counselling; disability support

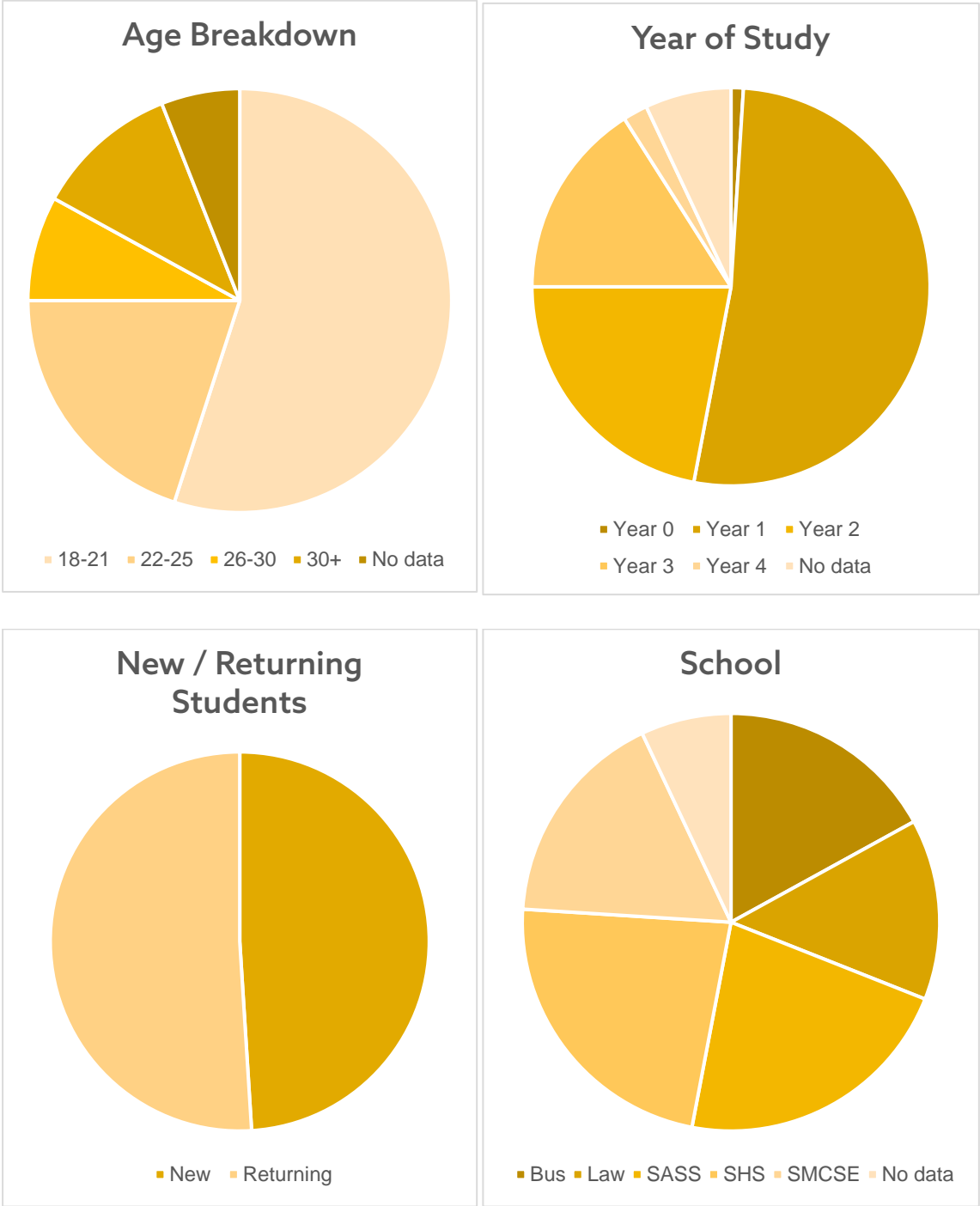
The script was developed into an online survey for callers to use in order to record written responses. This included theming the qualitative data collected based on conversations had. The survey questions are available in Appendix 1.

The Union contacted all students prior to receiving a call via emailed offering them an opportunity to opt out, select a preferred time or request a captioned video call. After a call was received, students were sent a follow-up email from the Union with more information and links to key points of the script information.

Cross-comparison and thematic analysis have been used to identify themes in student feedback. This has been reviewed with quantitative data and anecdotal evidence from the callers.

Demographics Breakdown

We spoke to and gathered feedback from 2,513 students in total across three weeks. The demographics by age, school and year appear in the following figures:



A full breakdown of our analysis by school is displayed in [Appendix B](#).

Check-in Calls Data Analysis

Checks and Service Information

Questions 1-6 from our calling script ([Appendix A](#)) were categorised as 'section 1': questions pertaining to checks and service information.

The following data may be interpreted from responses to these questions:

61% of students are living with family this year and a further 6% in their owned homes. Students choosing not to move to London until in-person teaching resumes was a common theme.

22% of students were living in houses within the private rental sector and 6% in halls; this means roughly one quarter of students could currently be facing contract issues due to another lockdown.

4% of students we spoke to and 24% of international students are yet to finalise their Visas. Slow systems and Met Police understaffing could also affect EU student's post-2020 due to Brexit.

21% of students were not registered at a GP for their term address. We informed every call recipient how to register at their GP and why it is important.

25% of students were worried about finances, with those living in halls accounting for the greatest proportion of those concerned: Halls (27%), Private Rented (27%) with Family (23%) property owners (22%). The importance of support in finances and housing, especially for Halls students cannot be overstated in these circumstances.

12% of all students were not aware of wellbeing and academic support. 16% of these were new starters and 12% were returning students. All call recipients were given information on wellbeing and academic services as well as the importance of the Unions Study Well project especially for new starters.

Open Question

There were two open questions in our script:

- What most worries you about the coming year?
- What are you most looking forward to about the coming year?

Below is an analysis of the prevalence of varying themes across open-field answers.

Worries

Over half of respondents reported having no worries. The remaining 808 students reported worries of some kind. The most common worries being related to **academic experience**, with concerns around online teaching, contact time, and quality of study accounting for 54% of all concerns.

Academic challenge was the second-most-prevalent concern. Many students perceived that their workloads were placing a heavy burden on them and worried about keeping up with their course. Access to services and software, which covers returning to site and engaging in in-person opportunities and services was also part of this.

Of those respondents with worries, 10% cited concerns about **connectiveness and the community** aspect of their student experience, which included making and meeting friends and colleagues. New students were almost twice as likely to be concerned about connectiveness and the community as returning students (14% of New, 7% of Returning).

5% of respondents explicitly mentioned **communications** as a worry. However, based on other feedback from respondents, it is felt that communications play a wider and underlying role in many other of the concerns cited and is a much more significant factor than reflected in this figure.

Positives

1,967 respondents identified things they were looking forward to this year. Of these, the highest proportion (37%) reported looking forward to **course content and the academic challenge of University**.

30% of respondents **looked forward to meeting people, either staff, or peers in person**, with 16% of respondents looking forward to the prospect of face-to-face study which they expect in term two.

14% of respondents said they were looking forward to **getting the year over and / or graduating** (22% of returning students and 7% of new students). Further commentary from respondents suggests that the larger proportion felt exhausted with university and wanted to get their time over with, however many felt trapped with little to no prospects should they wish to leave City.

Further Analysis

When talking about their **academic experience** respondents felt like they could not fully engage with their subjects through online learning. Comments often reflected issues with the quality of the learning experience, especially in view of the lack of peer-to-peer interaction and contact time:

"Worried that the course isn't that guided, Worried about independent learning I don't know about placement. The timetable is not clear, so confusing. Do not know who personal tutor is. Moodle a bit of a mess."

"Worried about course been fully online as it is a practical course. Assessments are next year, and it is hard to prepare online. The course is very content-heavy and feels they miss information when watching virtual lectures. No flexibility in the scheduling of content."

Respondents felt that problems in **academic challenges** resulted from the simultaneous need to adapt to a new learning environment and face increased

workload and expectation relative to previous study. These issues were compounded for students who experienced interruptions to their learning. Feelings of isolation were widespread and are felt to prevent affected individuals seeking help.

"Just came out of college and education stopped because of lockdown. Feels like I have forgotten lots of stuff. Been overwhelming."

Students living in halls, students privately renting in London, and EU and international students who have relocated to the U.K. appear to be worst-affected by social isolation and loneliness in terms of **community and connectedness**. It is not yet clear how the introduction of further lockdown measures will have affected these groups.

"I'm living away from home and don't have many friends nearby, and all my classes are online for this term so I'm a bit worried about feeling isolated."

Feedback from respondents suggests that students are experiencing increased anxiety and unable to make clear and certain decisions on their living arrangements and study due to poor communications from the university. The university's lack of clarity on its approach to term two compounds a number of issues including anxieties around rents, purchasing study materials, commuting, and value-for-money.

"Doesn't know what's going on. The uni has not told them anything. Confusion whether the classes are online or not, thinks the uni should have said if the whole course is online or not, adds confusion on moving into London because they need to pay for accommodation."

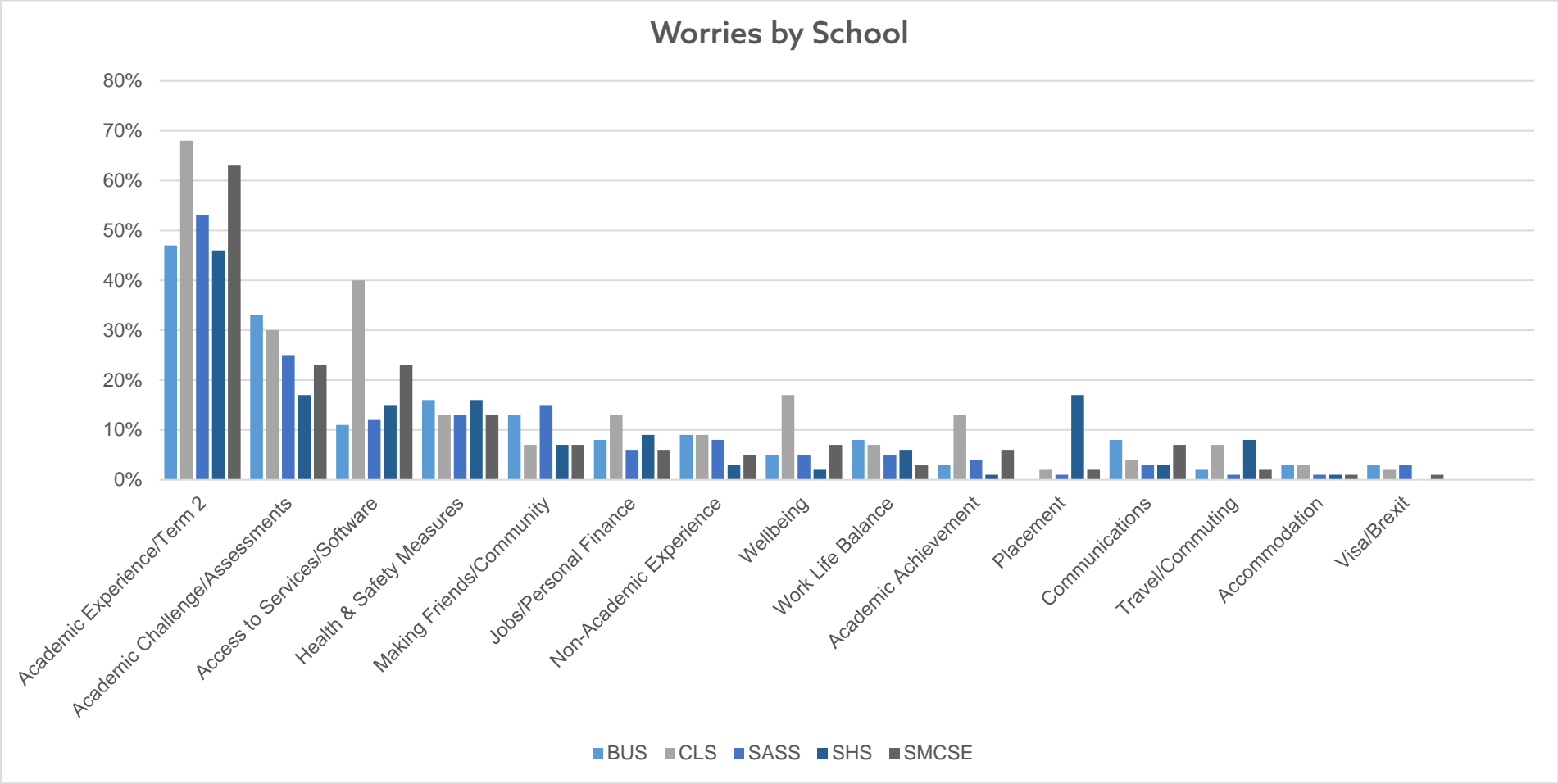
Appendix A: Questions from Script

1. Are you a new or returning student?
2. Do you know where you will be living and if so where?
3. Are you registered at a GP at your term-time address?
4. If you are an international student, do you have your visa sorted?
5. Are you worried about finances this year?
6. Are you aware of wellbeing and academic support?
7. What are you most worried about this year?
8. What are you most looking forward to?

Appendix B: School Breakdown

Below are tables which breakdown the student response in our analysis of the two qualitative questions.

Question 7: What are you most worried about this year?



Question 8: What are you most looking forward to this year?

