



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity



Living and Studying at Home: Commuter Students in the Aftermath of the Pandemic

**Sheila Riddell, Laura Cattell, Hazel Christie,
Rachael King, Sofia Shan & Lyn Tett
University of Edinburgh**

**Presentation to the Learning and Teaching Conference, University of
Edinburgh, 21st – 22nd June 2023**



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

PTAS funded research: Commuter Students in the Aftermath of the Pandemic



Central research question:

What are the social characteristics, lived experiences and outcomes of commuter students at the University of Edinburgh and how can the University respond more effectively to their academic and social needs?

Theoretical context: Much literature on commuting suggests that this is an individual choice – but our data show that the decision to commute is socially structured, often disadvantaging students who are already marginalised.



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

Methods



- Analysis of administrative data on social characteristics of first year Scottish domiciled commuter students;
- Survey of WP commuter students (Scottish domiciled, all years) to understand their social characteristics, reasons for commuting, experiences and perceptions of what the University might do to help them;
- In-depth interviews with 20 commuter students in different subject areas to gain a deeper understanding of experiences and outcomes.



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

Findings: Administrative data – strong connection between social background and commuter status



Commuter students account for about a third of first year Scottish domiciled undergraduates at the University of Edinburgh.

Those from the most deprived areas (SIMD1) are twice as likely to commute as those from the least deprived areas (SIMD5).

Students from state schools are roughly four times as likely to commute as those from independent schools (33.6% versus 8.5%).

WP students are more than twice as likely to commute compared with non-WP students (42.7% versus 17.87%).

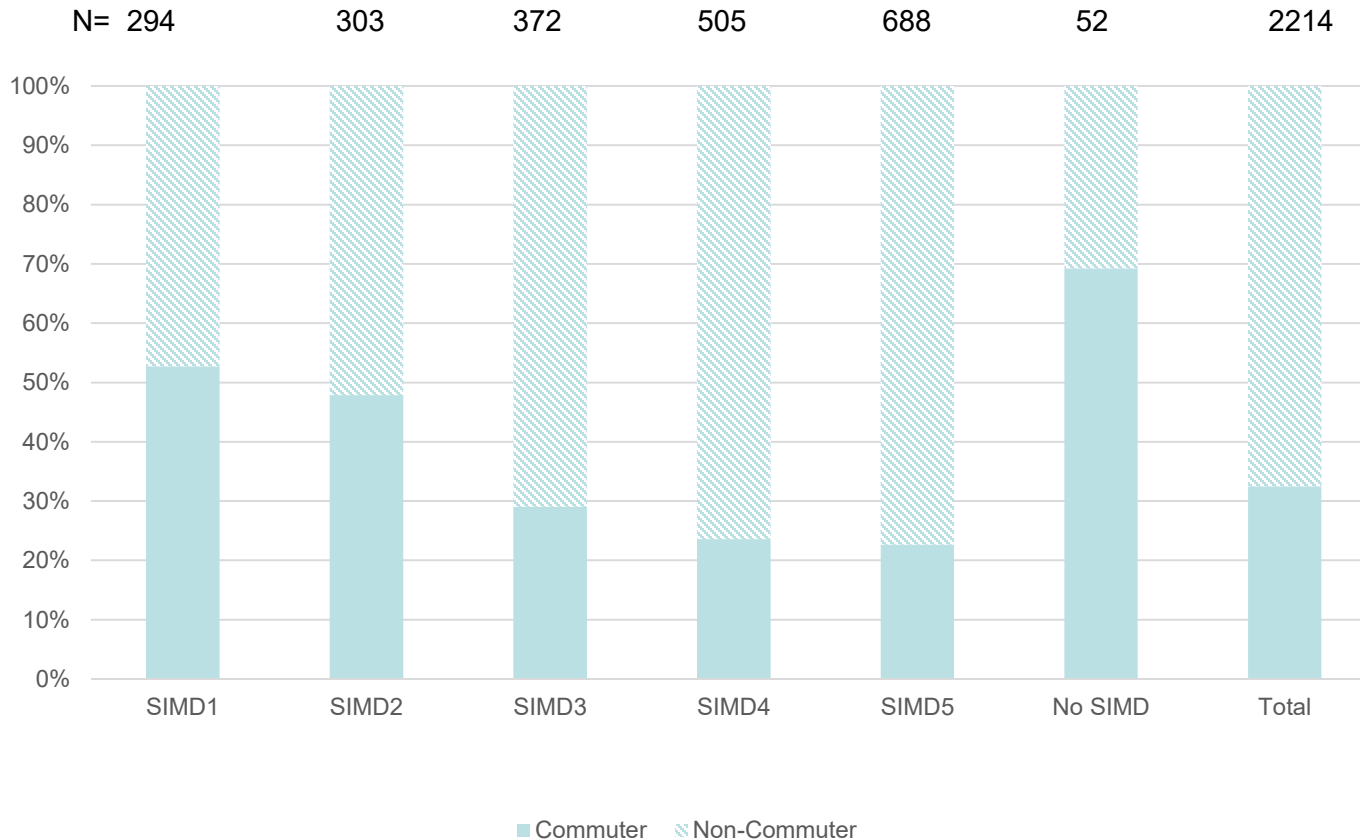
Mature students are four times as likely to commute as young students (83.7% versus 26.2%).

Disabled students are slightly more likely to commute in comparison with non-disabled students (36.5% versus 31.5%).

Just over 40% of BAME students commute, compared with 30% of non-BAME students.



Commuter and Non-Commuter Students by SIMD (students from **least** advantaged neighbourhoods twice as likely to commute as those from **most** advantaged neighbourhoods)

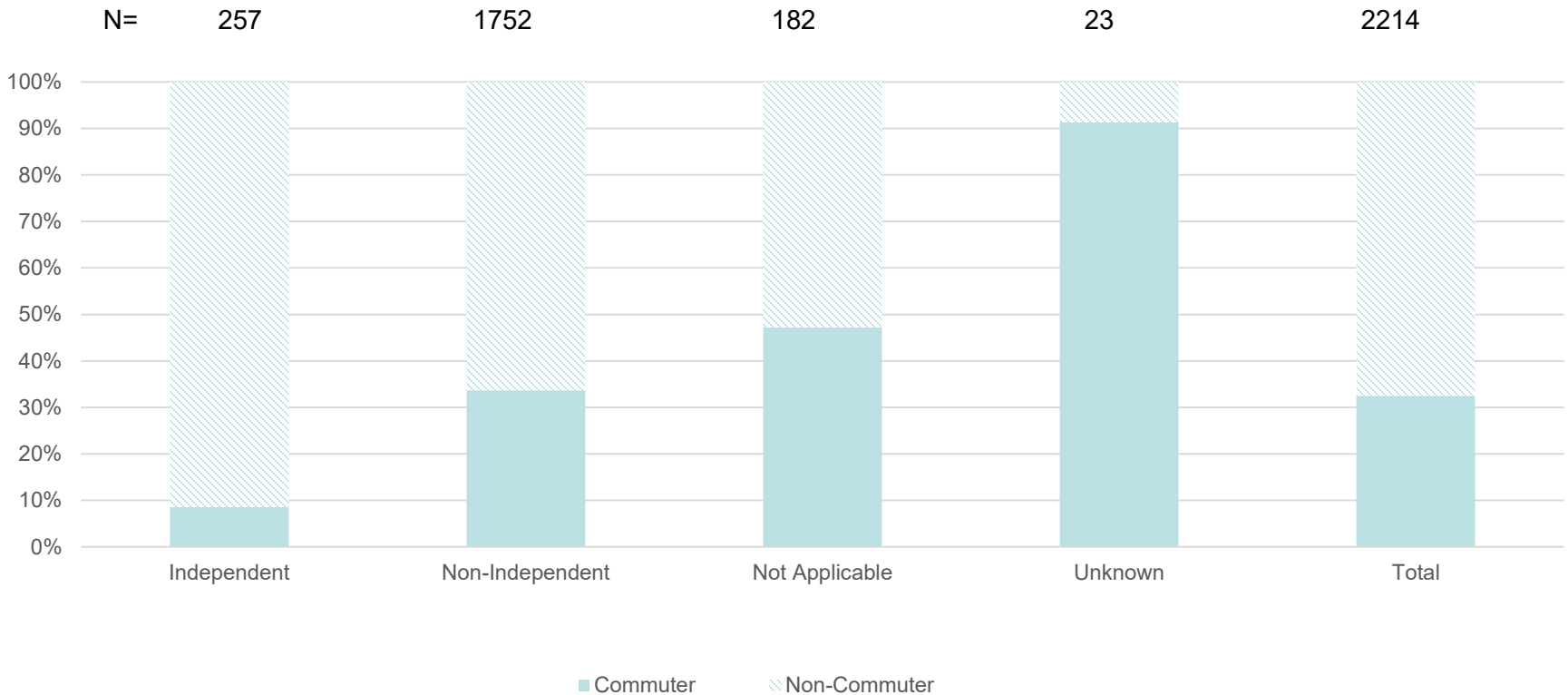




Commuting by educational background (state school students four times as likely to commute as private school students)



Centre for Research in Education Inclusion and Diversity





Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

Administrative data: Big differences by School and College



Over a third of students in HSS and MVM commute (36.8% and 35% respectively), compared with 22.2% in SCE.

Within HSS, Law and Education have the highest proportion of commuter students (49.7% and 45.3%). In Economics, only 9.8% of students commute.

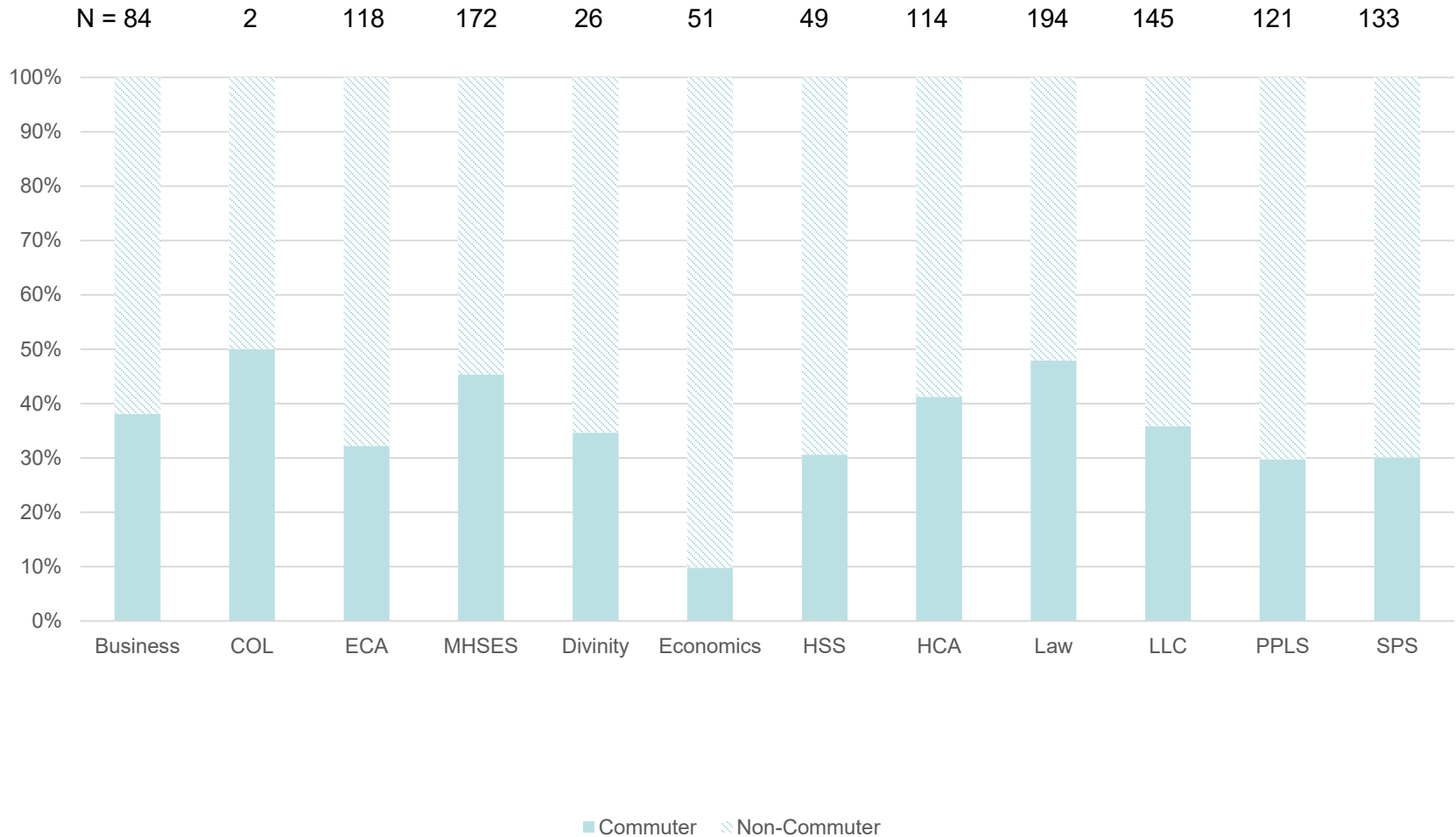
In the College of Medicine and Veterinary Science, the Vet School has fewer commuters (18.3%) compared with Edinburgh Medical School (38.6%) and Biomedical Science (32%).

Schools in the College of Science and Engineering have lower proportions of commuting students than elsewhere, ranging from 15.2% in Physics and Astronomy to 32.5% in Informatics.



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

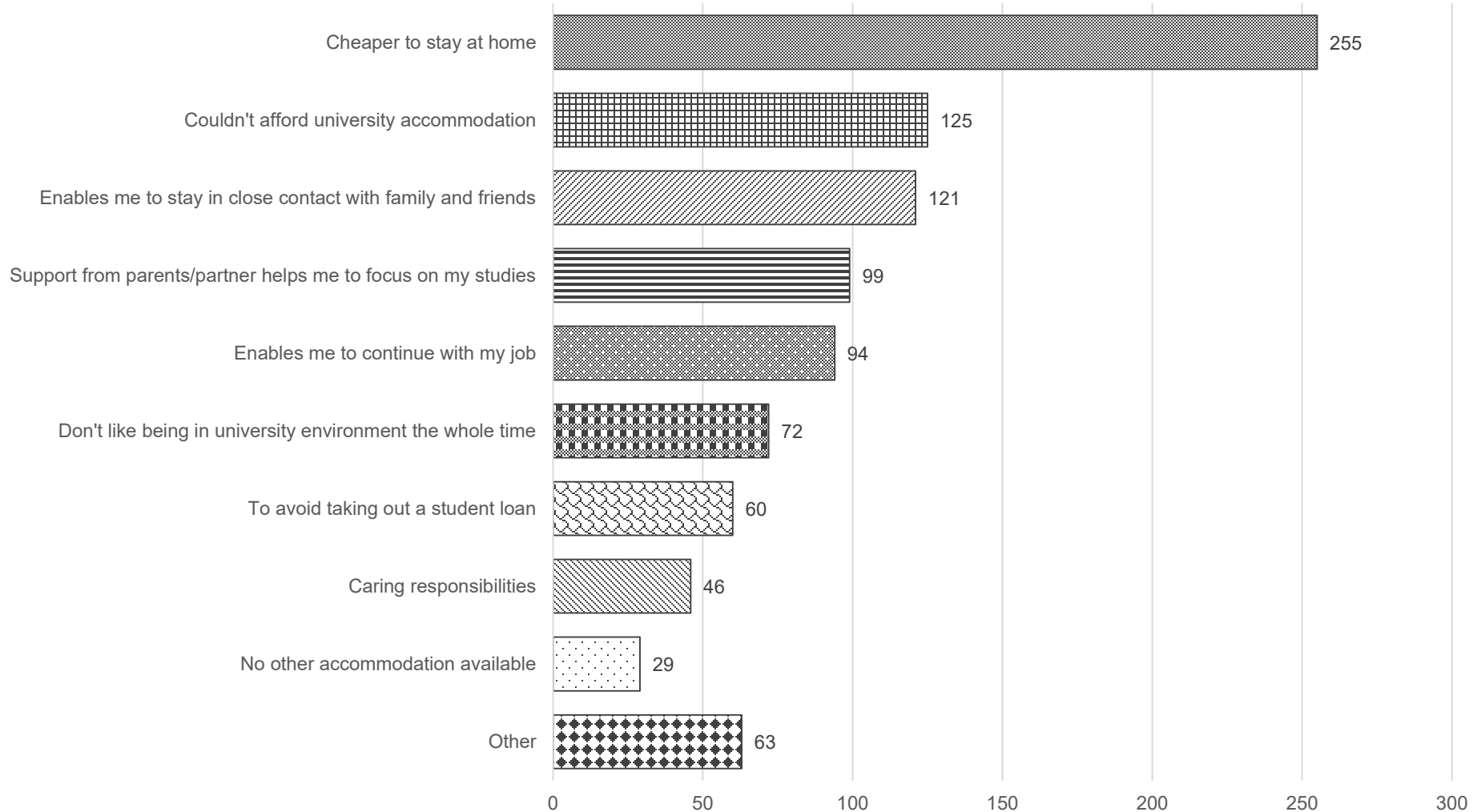
Big differences between Schools in CAHSS – Law is highest (almost 50%); Economics lowest (10%)





Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

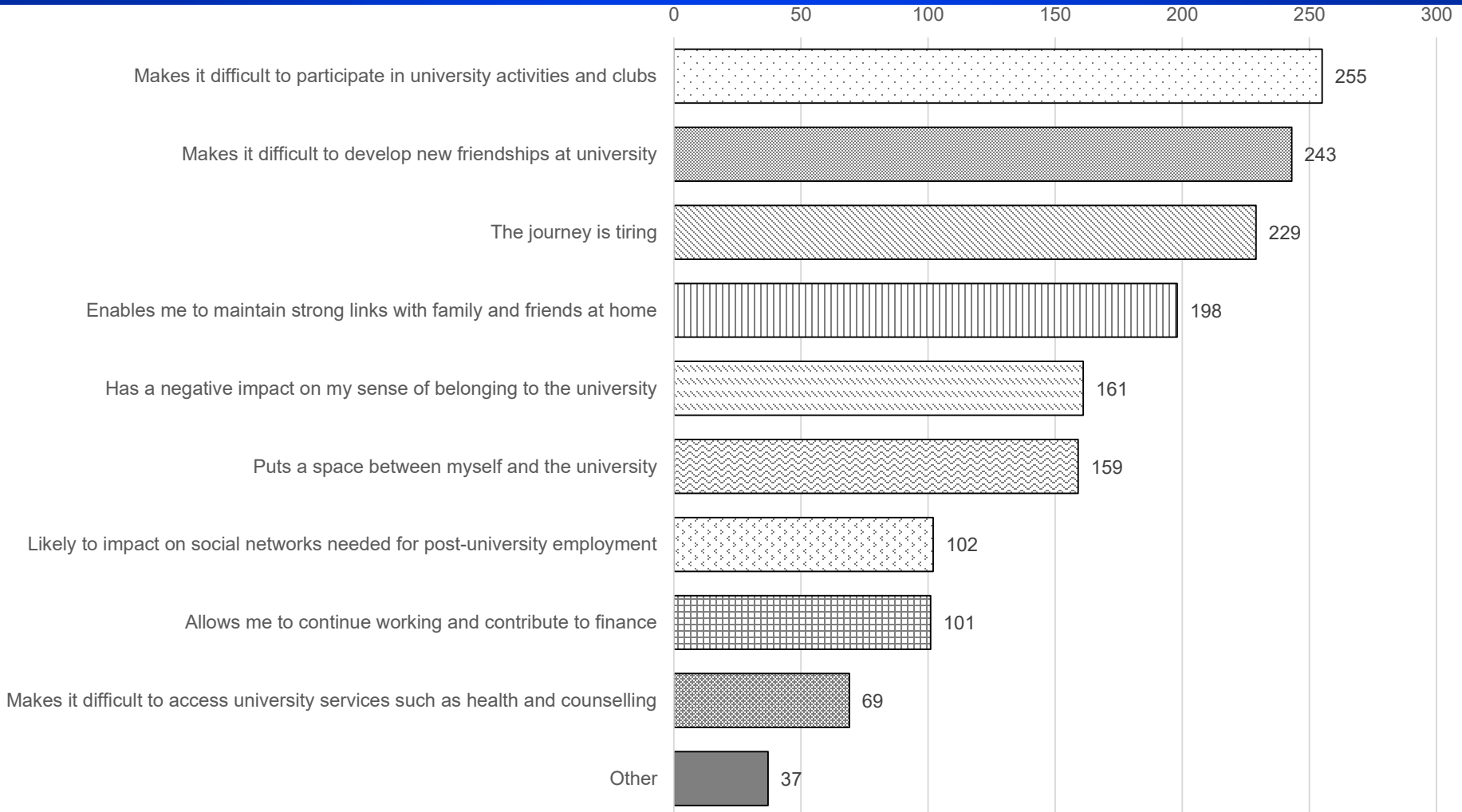
WP students' reasons for commuting. Financial reasons much more important than social reasons





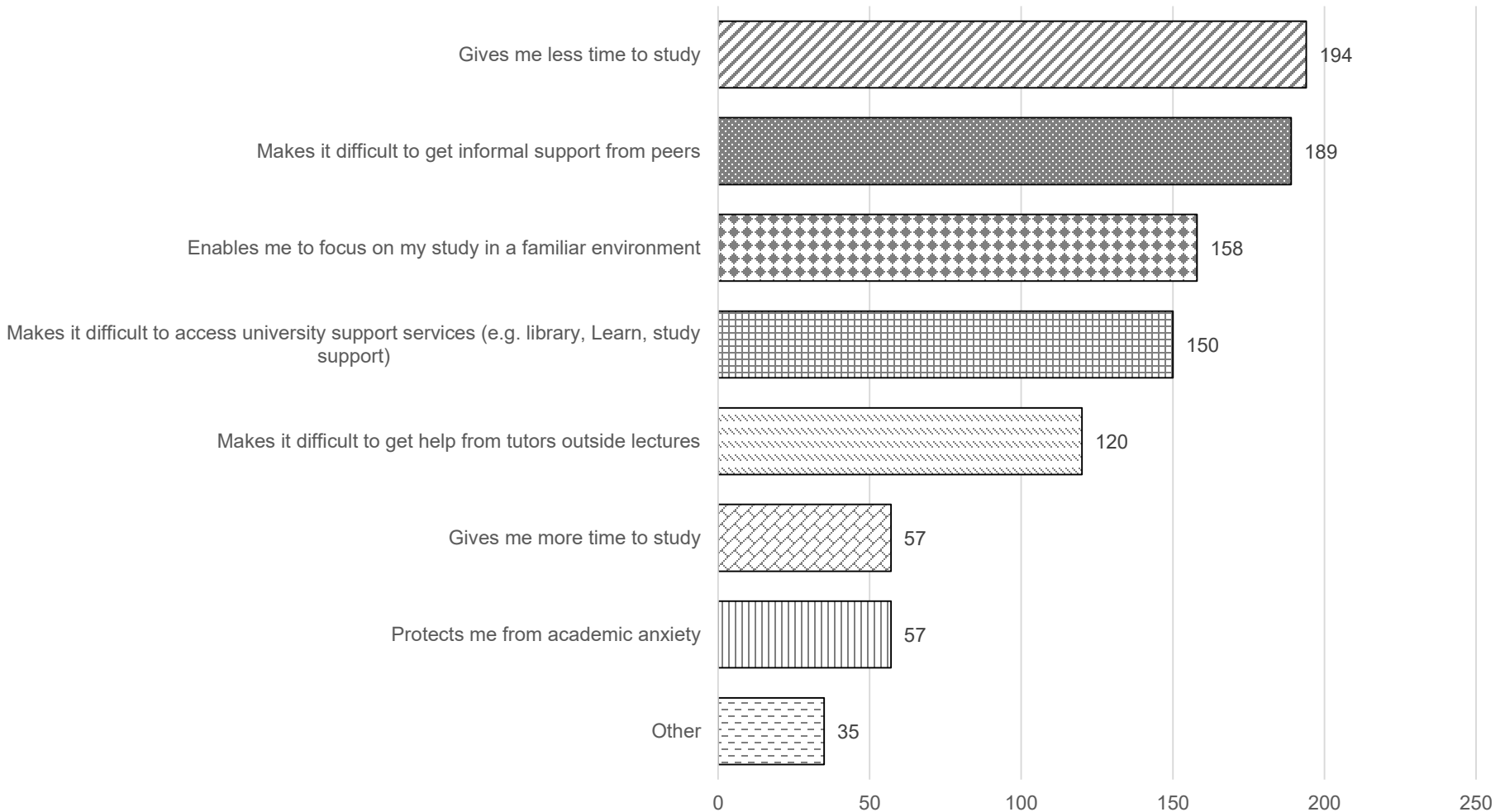
Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

Social consequences of commuting: negatives (various forms of social exclusion) outweigh positives (family support)





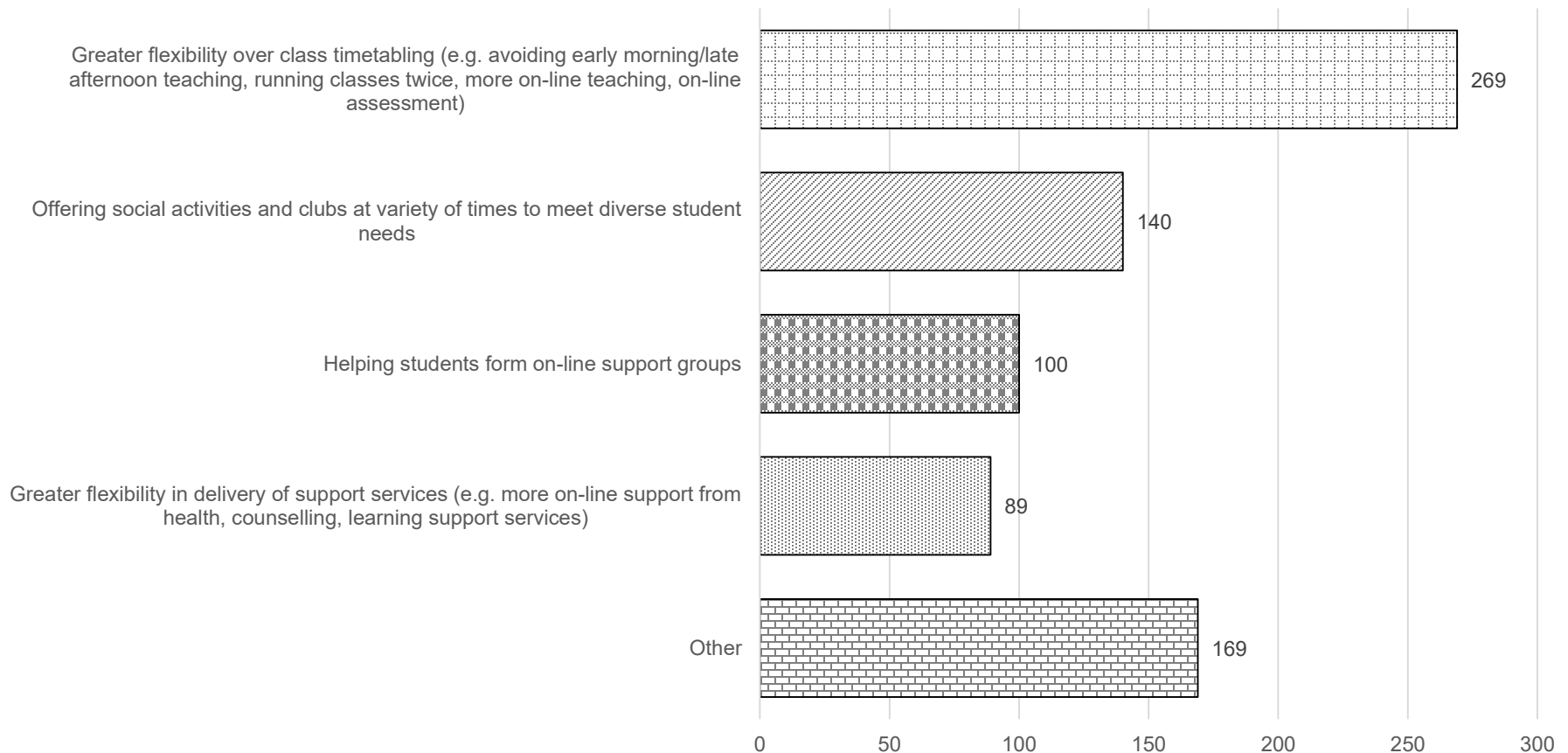
Academic consequences of commuting. Negatives – less time to study; lack of peer support; lack of access to support services & tutors. Positives – quiet place to study away from university stress.





Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

Changes to help commuter students: Timetabling flexibility; clubs & social activities at different times; on-line support groups; more flexible support services)





Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

Short vignette: Laurie



White Scottish young man – Year 1, Law. Lives in central belt post-industrial town (SIMD 2). Mum works as a nurse, Dad works in whiskey factory. Commutes 1 hour each way by bus/train and travels daily. Looking for part-time work

Attends classes but has not engaged in any social activities. Has no university friends and most school friends are doing apprenticeships.

Thinking about future work but unsure whether he will be able to fit in socially as a lawyer.

Reasonably happy at home but a bit like school - Mum checks up on study and tells him off if he does not go in to uni.

Does not have loan or bursary and does not contribute to household expenses.



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

Short vignette: Laurie



I didn't really want to move. I like my own surroundings; I like my friends. I'm quite happy here. ... I don't want to move away until I'm sure I'm not going to quit, that I'm quite alright in this programme.

On the negative side like you can't really engage as much with other students, you know I don't really speak to anyone else [...] I mean, you do get a bit lonely sometimes, because pretty much the full week, weekdays and stuff. I'm pretty much just myself. Umm, so if I'm not at uni I'm just at home studying or something else whatever I'm doing. I'm not really doing much else with anyone. I guess I'm not gonna say it's terrible. It's not the worst thing ever, but it's not perfect either, no.



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

Short vignette: Laurie



I was in the Law football team. So. I was a playing with them a bit. But ...I've not been going because it's kind of hard to just get there. So ... it's on Wednesday they play. I have no class, so it's gonna have to justify paying, going in and playing football on the only day that I'm not in the city, if you know what I mean, which is a bit annoying but. [...] you've got to pay to go in. And there's lunch as well when you're in there. That's about £25 quid every week. It's hard to justify. If I had classes that day it would be OK. You can understand that. But otherwise it's not really worth it.

If the university put more stuff online it would probably alienate you from the university even more. You would not go in there as much as you are. It would probably just make it even worse. ... If I spent all my time online I would become very disengaged eventually. I think by making sure I'm in there it sort of cuts that a wee bit. Just with lectures and stuff. Tutorials, you're much more focused and in person. Way more, you know if I sit with all my stuff I can replay things a million times. Tell yourself to focus on it. But if you're in person, there's nothing else to distract you.



Centre for Research in
Education Inclusion
and Diversity

Summary & conclusion



The decision to commute does not happen in a social vacuum – quantitative data shows that it is shaped by a range of social and economic factors, particularly social class and ethnicity.

Financial constraints are a major influence on decision to commute.

For many students, the dis-benefits of commuting (tiredness, social alienation and academic dislocation) outweigh the benefits (support from family, ability to continue working)

Much more help from the university is required: flexible timetabling, improved access to support services & social activities, space for relaxing, routine recording of lectures