

Return to Earn



A bespoke Deposit-Return scheme developed for UCL by Gather & Gather

The Issue

UCL uses approximately 500,000 disposable cups a year across its two cafe providers, Gather & Gather (Food at UCL) and the Student Union. Both the institution and community are motivated to 'Ditch the Disposable' and there is a clear policy mandate to reduce the number of disposables used. For the 2023/2024 academic year both the SU and Gather & Gather increased the disposable cup tax on campus from £0.25 to £0.50.

Despite initiatives including the cup tax, selling UCL branded keep cups, offering an app-based reuse cup scheme free at point of sale (Club Zero), and offering ceramic as default in outlets for drink in customers, disposable use was still averaging around 60% for Food at UCL outlets.

Our Solution

A new deposit-return scheme was designed based on feedback from the UCL community that would solve the user experience issues faced by customers and operators. The scheme needed to be an economically & environmentally-viable and scalable reuse scheme that worked for all UCL stakeholders. The proof-of-concept trial was conducted at UCL East during Term 1 Academic year 2024-2025.

The deposit was set at £1.00, the deposit is not held on the customer's card which enables anyone who returns the cup to receive the deposit (similar to Sweden's government scheme). Cups were marked with individual QR codes to allow for identification. Bespoke tech-enabled return (drop) points were designed in-house and were integrated into standard UCL waste systems. Drop points were located in cafes and at building exits to capture footfall flow.



Key Design Elements of Scheme

- Work for both Food at UCL and the Student's Union so they could offer the same product without hurting customer convenience.
- Integrate the scheme into existing systems and processes including EPOS systems.
- Keep the customer pricing competitive and low.
- Be gamified, so there is a variety of motivations for interacting with the scheme.
- Reduce any barriers to use for customers. Nothing needs to be downloaded, and no information is needed from customers for them to use a cup.
- Make returns open to all, easy, quick and obvious.
- Be commercially viable

Scheme Partners



Gather & Gather designed, funded, project managed and operated the trial

Circulayo provided the technology and integration services

Lolly supported the trial building bespoke reporting and POS integration

Blue Planet provided the washing services

Vinci supported the trial with cup collection (abandoned or discarded in wrong waste stream)

Circular & Co provided the cups & lids

Glasdon provided the return points (bins)

Trial Objectives



For the scheme to be financially comparable or cheaper to other reuse schemes on the market. - **Objective met**



To achieve a return rate that causes less CO2 emissions and uses less plastic than disposable cups. - **Objective partially met, projected to be met for plastic by month 5 of operation and for carbon by month 12 of operation.**



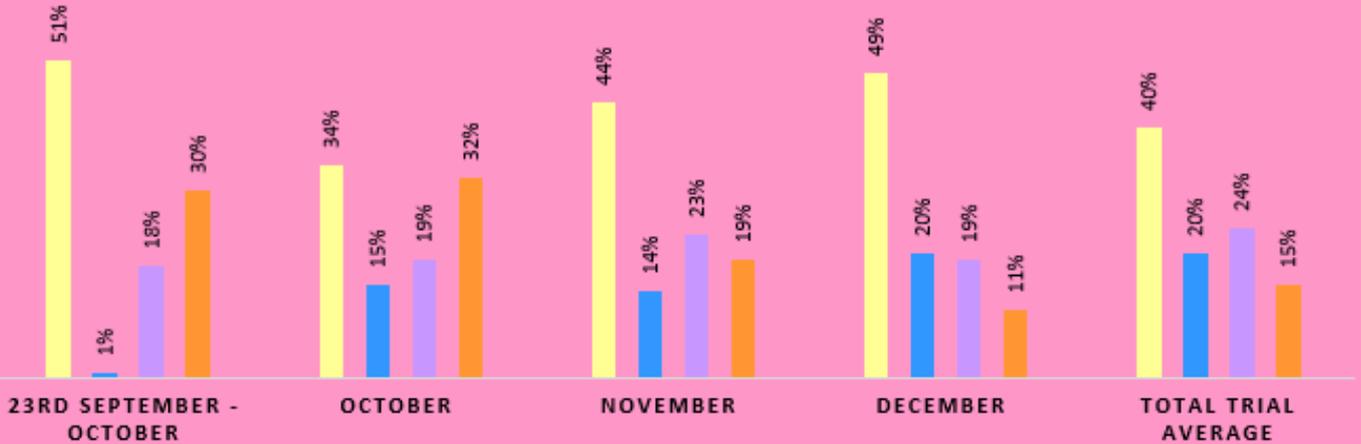
To create a reuse scheme that is popular with both customers and stakeholders. - **Objective met.**



Results

THE TYPES OF CUPS CUSTOMERS ORDERED

■ % of customers using Return to Earn cup
 ■ % of customers using disposable cup
■ % of customers using ceramic in-house cup
 ■ % of customers using their own cup



Return to Earn Cup Scheme	From 23rd September	October	November	December	Whole Trial
Return rate of cups to drop points	94%	66%	78%	80%	65%
Loss Rate (cups not returned to drop points)	n/a	9%	15.9%	1.4%	8.6%
Average re-use rate*	1.05	2.17	2.02	2.35	2.35
Number of return-to-earn cups sold	91	3686	3265	1749	8791
Type of cup		Cost per unit			
Disposable cup & lid (including waste costs)		£0.16			
Return to Earn cup & lid (physical product, tech & washing)		£0.68			

*Based on the plastic weight of the Circular & Co cups in comparison to the plastic weight of Gather and Gather disposables, each Circular & Co cup would need to be used 10 times to reduce plastic use. Based on the Life Cycle Analysis from Circular & Co, done by the University of Exeter, which included washing, each cup needs to be used 3 times to reduce CO2 emissions.



Customer Feedback

56%

thought the cup scheme was explained clearly

82%

thought the cup was easy to borrow and return.

Stated reasons for not returning a cup at a drop point:

- Not enough return points
- Issues with refunds not being given at return points

93%

liked the cup design and feel.

71%

of people replaced a disposable with the scheme.

100%

of people asked said they would like to see the scheme permanently around UCL



Register your interest

Please complete our interest registration form to stay in the loop of the future of Retun-To-Earn

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