Student engagement in the context of commuter students

Summary report

Liz Thomas and Robert Jones
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About us

The Student Engagement Partnership

Student engagement is about empowering students to shape their own educational experience and creating excellent teaching and learning within a connected and cohesive higher education community.

The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) champions and develops student engagement practice in the English higher education sector. Through our work, we provide expertise and insight, bringing together established and emerging knowledge and practice in order to equip student engagement professionals, practitioners and decision-makers across the sector with the knowledge and skills they need to make a success of student engagement in their context.

We are housed by the National Union of Students, and we bring together a wide-ranging group of representatives from sector bodies, HE providers and students’ unions, including HEFCE, QAA, HEA, GuildHE, AoC, LFHE, OIA and Jisc, to support and guide our work, and address shared challenges in student engagement at a national level.

Find out how we can support you at

[link to website]
[link to contact]

Liz Thomas

Liz Thomas is an independent researcher and consultant for higher education and Professor of Higher Education at Edge Hill University.

Liz has nearly twenty years’ experience of undertaking and managing research about widening participation, student retention and success and institutional approaches to improving the student experience. She is committed to using research to inform national and institutional policy, practice and evaluation, and has developed and led change programmes to facilitate this.

In 2013 Liz contributed to several studies for HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access to inform the National Strategy for Widening Access and Student Success. In 2014-15 Liz worked with CFE Research to explore and develop an evaluation framework for widening participation on behalf of HEFCE, as well as completing the three-year formative evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme. In 2016 Liz was appointed to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) panel, with a remit to focus on widening participation.

Liz is currently working with the Higher Education Academy, Action on Access and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to deliver and evaluate the ‘What Works?’ student retention and success change programme, building on the ‘What Works?’ programme of 2008-2012, which sought to identify effective approaches to improving student retention and success. Other current work includes working with the Equality Challenge Unit to review and improve the participation of students from equality groups in higher education.

Robert Jones

Dr R. D. Jones is a researcher in the fields of higher and further education and widening participation. He is the author of Student Retention and Success synthesis published by the Higher Education Academy and the introduction to widening participation synthesis. He has previously worked at the University of Birmingham researching learning and teaching, access to higher education and student retention and success. Rob then took a post at the University of Edinburgh, where he researched knowledge transfer in the context of the Scottish HE sector. He has strong editorial skills, having worked on publications for the Higher Education Academy and as book reviews editor for the journal Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning.
Foreword

Since 2013 TSEP have worked across the higher education sector in England, to champion and develop student engagement practice. Through our work we have identified common themes and challenges faced by higher education providers and students’ unions. During a period of wide ranging and fast paced change in the higher education landscape, concerns relating to how to engage ‘commuter’ or ‘travel in; travel out’ students has been repeatedly raised with us. It is a constituency of students that is growing and whose experience and attitude towards their education could render traditional forms of engagement inappropriate for a new generation of diverse student experiences.

Following our successful partnership with Liz Thomas Associates in delivering the HEA funded research into student perspectives and experiences of independent learning in 2015, we are proud to present this research as our latest collaboration, incorporating a team of trained student peer-researchers into our action research approach.

It was clear to us that a deeper understanding of the barriers to engagement faced by commuter students, and examples of emerging practice and ideas to address these challenges was needed. This has been reinforced by the response and participation we have received throughout this research study, from our initial call for evidence to our national workshop to explore the emerging findings. We hope that the findings and recommendations herein support colleagues in their work in devising successful approaches to engagement that are inclusive of the broad diversity of their students.

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- Birmingham City University
- Bishop Grosseteste University
- City University London
- Kingston University London
- Newman University
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bradford
- University of Manchester
- University of Salford
- University of Sunderland

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Project Team

- Liz Thomas (LTA)
- Tobin Webb (TSEP)
- Ellie Russell (TSEP)
- Robert Jones (LTA)
- David Malcolm (NUS)
Research design and findings
About the study

Traditionally in the UK, higher education students have re-located to their place of study and lived in student accommodation, with an element of communal living – and learning. Increasingly however, students are continuing to live at home and/or having to commute to their place of study. This applied, qualitative study focuses on understanding the engagement of commuter students in higher education, and how engagement can be enhanced by purposive actions of higher education providers (HEPs) and/or students’ unions (SUs). It addresses the following research objectives:

i. To describe the nature of the challenge higher education providers (HEPs) face in relation to the engagement of commuter students.

ii. To document the kinds of initiatives that providers and students’ unions (SUs) are developing to increase student engagement.

iii. To identify what works to improve the engagement (and wider outcomes) of commuter students.

iv. To develop guidance and resources for HEPs and SUs wanting to enhance the engagement of commuter students.

There are not however universally or widely accepted definitions of either commuter students or student engagement. We defined commuter students as:

Those who travel to their higher education provider (HEP) from their parental or family home, which they lived in prior to entering higher education - rather than having re-located to live in student accommodation (or close to the HEP) for the purposes of studying. This includes full-time and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate, and in all disciplines and types of institution.

Commuter students in this study were self-selected, and included: undergraduates and postgraduates; full and part-time students; and mature and young students; in all types of HEP.

We used a broad and inclusive understanding of student engagement, based on areas of activity:


ii. Enhancement: Engagement in co-curricular and enhancement activities (including representation, curriculum design and leadership roles) which contribute to personal and professional development; and

iii. Social: Engagement in formal and informal sport, social and leisure activities with HE peers.

Our study used a mixed methods research design which consisted of:

i. A review of institutional documentation, in particular Access Agreements, to pinpoint and assess the issues identified by HEPs in engaging commuter students, and the interventions and approaches currently being implemented.

ii. A sector-wide call for further examples of how commuter students are engaged across the dimensions identified above (academic, enhancement and social).

iii. Nine institutional case studies to explore issues and approaches, and the ways in which these are shaped by context.

iv. Interviews with 60 commuter students, undertaken by trained student-peer researchers within case study institutions.

v. A participatory workshop to explore interim findings and develop recommendations for practice.

We worked in partnership with the following universities, who recruited and supported student-peer researchers and put themselves forward as institutional case studies:

- Birmingham City University (BCU)
- Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU)
- City, University of London (CUL)
- Kingston University London (KUL)
- Newman University, Birmingham (NUB)
- University of Bradford (UOB)
- University of Manchester (UOM)
- University of Salford (USA)
- University of Sunderland (USU)

The research was undertaken ethically and student identities have been protected. All interviews and discussions were transcribed and examined for emerging themes. The implications of these themes were then analysed in relation to student and institutional contexts. Many of the findings were subsequently tested at the participatory workshop.
Findings

Student engagement

Across the sector and within institutions there is not a fixed definition of student engagement, nor a consistent way of interpreting what it constitutes, and this was reflected in our case studies. Rather understandings were context-specific and sometimes not explicit; there were inconsistencies both between and within institutions.

Despite the lack of clarity, staff were in broad agreement with the literature that engagement is positive and that deeper engagement is preferable to more superficial forms. Conversely commuter students identified what they perceived to be the risks of some types of engagement (particularly social engagement) and the advantages of being less engaged in - and distracted by – non-academic activities. Furthermore we found commuter students to be more willing to engage in the academic sphere compared to the enhancement and social spheres. They often viewed wider engagement as ‘nice to have’ rather than an ‘essential’ element of a successful HE experience. Staff tended to view this lack of engagement beyond the academic sphere as more problematic.

Students tended to view engagement as synonymous with attendance, rather viewing it as a graduated spectrum. Staff by contrast viewed engagement in broader terms, recognising that mere attendance was not sufficient to qualify as a meaningful form of engagement, at least in some contexts.

Commuter students

The concept of commuter students resonates with people across the sector, and seems to be tapping into concerns that staff and unions have about certain groups’ superficial levels of engagement, but it is not currently a widely used term. Within this study institutions mostly chose to formally identify commuter students by comparing their home and term-time postcodes, although the limitations of this approach were acknowledged. Other terms in use include ‘live at home’ students and ‘learn and go’ students. Commuter students is a broad term, covering a heterogeneous group, raising questions about the utility of looking a commuter students as a single group. Indeed, different approaches to segmentation have been used, and we suggest that it may be useful to think consider how much choice students exercise when deciding to commute, together with how much difficulty the commute itself entails. It is how these two variables interact which seems to influence types and levels of engagement.

Data collection

Most institutions do not currently analyse their data by commuter status, and most of the case study institutions undertook an analysis of their student population by commuter status to inform this project. Data collection and analysis is hindered by the lack of a clear definition of a commuter student, resulting in the use of a proxy measure, generated from the comparison of home and term-time postcodes. To obtain more accurate and meaningful data, institutions could collect information by asking students about residential/commuting arrangements at their point of course registration. It may also be useful to look at the relationship between commuter student status and other characteristics, such as socio-economic group, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, entry qualifications and tariff points and subject studied.

Some institutions have found it useful to map the location of their commuter students to help support the ways in which they engage commuter students. There is however a risk of obscuring important aspects of a student’s background and the analysis could hide more than it reveals. Data collection should therefore be considered in relation to the development of an appropriate definition(s), taking into account intersectionality with other student characteristics, and segmentation of the commuter student population.

Commuter students’ experiences and views

We explored students’ experiences and views of commuting, and about engagement in the academic sphere, enhancement activities and socially.

Students told us that commuting is tiring, expense and stressful, and many had not fully appreciated this before they became commuter students. Some of the difficulties were related to mode of travel, for example parking issues, traffic jams and accidents and cancelled services. Other challenges were however concerned with the institutional context and culture, and could be things that higher education providers could address. Students identified security issues associated with walking, public transport and
driving, and while not all of these are within the control of HEIs there are some steps that could and should be taken to improve the security of vulnerable students.

Once on site students experienced a lack of ‘place’ to spend time, store things, and where they could ‘belong’, and they also felt restricted by the food available. More generally there was a sense of ‘othering’ as being a commuter student is not acknowledged within the institutional discourse; it is assumed that students are living nearby, with other students, and engaging in a hectic social life. The institutional culture and discourse do not assume that students are making tiring journeys to study, with little time or inclination for wider engagement – and this is compounded by TV and media images of students relaxing and socialising, not struggling and studying. But many students feel that have no choice but to commute for a range of reasons.

The students in our study say they prioritise academic engagement, but it was widely acknowledged that a trip to the institution needs to be ‘worthwhile’, thus students are making value judgement about the efficacy of attending taught session. They also generally managed to participate in group work, but they needed to fit this in with travel arrangements and other commitments. Students were critical of the attitudes towards teaching staff who reinforced and reflected in the institutional stance that commuting is not the norm, and is not to be accommodated through small adaptions. Students who are delayed travelling can face humiliation and worse and are particularly disadvantaged in relation to assessments that start first thing in the morning. Students again pointed to the specialist equipment and clothing required for some subjects, which is difficult to carry around. Students in rural areas pointed to the limited internet speed, and thus that online is not a panacea in this context. Students on professional programmes identified the additional challenges of professional placements which do not take into account their home location when placements are allocated.

Students tended to undervalue and under-participate in enhancement and social activities. It should be noted however that a significant number participated in ambassadorial and/or mentor type roles within their academic department. Such roles may appeal to commuter students because they have links within the academic sphere, and the activities tend to take place during the day.

Enhancement and organised social activities are also captured by the institutional discourse of residential students, with events being organised almost exclusively in the evenings, and assuming physical presences on site. Informal socialisation was hindered by the lack of ‘free’ places – meaning both available and without indirect costs (e.g. for refreshments). Plus, the lack of a social network – having nobody to go with - could inhibit participation in social and enhancement activities. Finally, we identified that commuter students prioritised academic engagement at the expense of enhancement and social engagement, seemingly unaware of the advantages of these types and sites of engagement to their implicitly and explicitly cited goals of achieving the qualification and secure an enhanced employment outcome.

Solutions

Students were more likely to identify solutions to help them engage through the workshops rather than individual interviews, but much of the focus was on overcoming the challenges of commuting, and changing some aspects of provision of engagement opportunities.

In summary, students suggested the following ways to reduce some of the challenges of commuting:

- Sharing information about travelling, e.g. through social media.
- Developing a commuter student community, which could be facilitated by pre-entry or induction events, regular meetings and through online forum or social media.
- Provision of lockers and a common room providing a practical and emotional base for commuter students.
- Bus service, e.g, a transport hub, to reduce of the costs, stresses and risks of travelling.
- Security campaigns, especially in relation to personal safety, although vehicle security was raised in one workshop.
- Financial support such as subsidised travel, bursaries and a taxi fund.
- Improved parking, including more parking spaces, more permits, free parking and longer opening hours of the car parks.
Students identified ways in which their academic engagement could be enhanced, including:

- Commuter student-centered timetabling.
- Lecture capture as an alternative way of engaging with academic sessions that they have paid for.
- Greater opportunity to study at home, including provision of software and hardware, on-line resources, faster internet access, and the option of submitting assignments remotely.
- Greater awareness and acknowledgement of commuters by staff within the academic context.

The more limited suggestions regarding enhancement and social activities included:

- Day-time activities.
- Enhancement activities timetabled into the gaps on the timetable.
- Flexibility, including local opportunities, about when and where participation takes place.
- Enhancement and social activities within the academic context.
- Commuter student space, such as common room or base to spend free time in.

Institutions focused more on information provision and promoting networking, rather than structural or cultural changes. i.e. focus is on getting students to make more informed decisions and adapt to fit into, rather than changing attitudes and opportunities on site. There are however some examples about ways in which the academic curriculum and resources have been re-organised and designed with commuter students in mind. Student partnerships have proved an effective way of engaging some commuter students, while extending this work through mentoring helps to engage a larger proportion of this group – if they take up the opportunities that are offered. There is some interest in offering off-site opportunities (e.g. volunteering and social activities), but this is under-developed in the majority of institutions. There is still a great deal that could be done, and one would expect that institutions will become more ‘commuter-friendly’ over time, using this report as a starting point. We identified interventions that fall into ten broad categories:

i. Pre-entry information and marketing about commuting to inform decision-making.

ii. Pre-entry and induction activities and opportunities to meet other (commuter) students.

iii. Creating an institutional identity and sense of belonging for commuter students.

iv. Targeted information, opportunities and support for commuter students once in higher education.

v. Re-organising the academic curriculum, delivery and resources to support the engagement of commuter students.

vi. Student partnerships, using students’ expertise and resources to promote engagement and belonging by commuter students.

vii. Space for commuter students on site.

viii. Financial and travel support for commuter students.

ix. Inclusive strategies, including the use of technology and social media.

x. Research about the experiences and ‘needs’ of commuter students.

Details of specific interventions in relation to each of these categories are provided in the full report.
Conclusions, implications and recommendations
Conclusions, implications and recommendations

Is commuting a barrier to engagement?

Commuting to study presents practical challenges for many commuter students, and students were not always aware of these issues when they chose to participate in HE in this way. These practical challenges impact on academic, enhancement and social engagement in ascending order, and thus potentially ‘commuter students’ is a useful lens to use to examine student engagement. It should be recognised however that the group is diverse, and may benefit from a more nuanced definition, additional segmentation and looking at the relationship with other student characteristics such as class, ethnicity and age.

What are the factors that inhibit engagement?

Students lacked – or failed to access – information about the realities of commuting, and they also encountered structural and cultural issues within many higher education providers that negatively impact on the engagements of students who commute.

Structural barriers include the timetable which is designed to maximise the use of the estate, but which is often not commuter-student friendly (early starts, late finishes, large gaps and teaching sessions spread over all or most of the week); policies and practices that either penalise commuter students (e.g. late arrival penalties, or the requirement to submit assessment in hard copy) or that do not facilitate their engagement (e.g. lack of lecture capture and other supportive technology for blended and flexible learning and more widespread use of social media); lack of spaces on site for commuter students to store things, spend time and engage in social and enhancement activities during the day; expensive and often income-generating accommodation and catering on site; lack of on-site parking and links to public transport hubs; etc.

Cultural barriers relate to the attitudes and ways of doing things that pervade and inform practices within HEPs. Thus, there is a sense in which commuter students are invisible: they are not widely recognised and acknowledged, even in institutional marketing and communication pre- and post-entry. The culture also informs the ‘dominant discourse’ or assumptions that are held about where students live and how they should and will want to engage. For example, the unthinking expectation that students are able to attend networking events in the evening, or that they have somewhere to leave their lab coats and boots. There appears to still be a cultural ‘gold standard’ which reflects the experience of the majority of academics and senior professional staff employed in higher education – and perhaps this needs ‘disrupting’.

There may also be shortcomings in commuter students’ appreciation of the value and purpose of participating in higher education. The research participants largely viewed themselves as ‘good students’, who prioritised their studying with a view to gaining their academic qualification and progressing into employment, but engagement was selective, based on their response to the question: is it worthwhile? This value judgement extended to enhancement activities and social engagement. Staff expressed concern that some commuter students may not appreciate the wider benefits of engagement - e.g. to achieving their academic and career aspirations.

Commuter students appear to have lower levels of engagement across all three types and sites of engagement, but in the main they prioritise academic engagement above and beyond enhancement and social engagement. This raises the following questions:

Are commuter students unable or unwilling to engage?

It is difficult to conclude why commuter students do or don’t engage, and it is impossible to generalise across a diverse group. Our evidence however suggests that there are very practical barriers to engaging beyond the academic sphere caused by the travelling itself, and reinforced by the structure and culture of many higher education institutions, which assume a traditional model of student residency and engagement. There are other practical issues that also impact on engagement such as family, caring and employment responsibilities. But there is also an element of not necessarily unwillingness, but perhaps lack of awareness of the benefits of engaging.
Do commuter students have lower rates of success in higher education?

A widely held, if often implicit, view is that commuter students – especially those exhibiting other non-traditional or disadvantaged characteristics – will experience less good outcomes from higher education. The evidence from a range of national studies suggests that commuter students have lower outcomes than students who relocate to study, and this difference is particularly pronounced for younger students, in summary.

- Travelling to study negatively influences engagement, but there is no data about the retention of commuter students.
- Students who live at home are less likely have achieve a first or upper-second class degree, and more likely to experience academic failure.
- Students who lived away from home were more likely to be working in a job being undertaken only or mainly by graduates.

To what extent does lower academic, enhancement and/or social engagement explain differential outcomes?

In short we do not have conclusive evidence from this study that lower rates of engagement are causally related to lower outcomes for commuter students. There is however a significant body of institutional, national and international evidence pointing to the various benefits of student engagement. We do however need to develop our evidence base about the relationship between student engagement and outcomes, and whether or not all forms of engagement are of equal importance and value. Staff in the interviews were concerned about imposing their views of a successful student onto contemporary (commuter) students, but equally there is a risk of not conveying to students and helping them to develop understanding of the potential benefits of engagement on their academic, employment and personal development and lifelong outcomes.

Recommendations

The recommendations consider both:

- What can be done to improve commuter students understanding of and ability to engage? And
- How can and should higher education providers be more inclusive of commuter students?

They are directed towards specific processes, and those actors who have responsibility for, or interest in them.

Student experience or student engagement staff within HEPs and SUs

R1: Challenge the institutional discourse and culture which assumes that all students are residential. Provide opportunities to recognise and validate commuter students and give them a voice in unions, institutions, faculties, departments and courses.

R2: Agree a definition of commuter students that is applicable for data collection and relevant to policy and practice within your institution, perhaps using the definition and evidence in this report as a starting point for discussion.

R3: Initiate work to find out about your commuter student population, and to recognise the expectations and experiences of different commuter groups.

R4: Use the ‘commuter student lens’ to examine student experience and outcomes and collaborate with commuter students as partners to look for effective solutions.

R5: Work towards both structural and cultural change, as well as helping students to better understand the implications of commuting and different types of engagement, both pre- and post-entry.

Data collection and analysis at national and institutional level.

R6: Undertake initial analysis of your commuter student population (e.g. based on the same home and term-time address). Consider how this population is distributed by subject, level and mode of study; the outcomes for commuter students; and the intersectionality of the commuter student population with socio-economic status, ethnicity, age, gender, disability and entry qualifications and tariff points in relation to distribution and outcomes.

R7: Disseminate the findings of your analysis within the institution and sector, to raise awareness of the issues and inform policies and
interventions. This may involve presenting data visually, or in an interactive format to meet the needs of different groups.

**TEF policy makers, panel, assessors and institutional submissions**

R8: Be explicit about the importance of ‘local students’ as a contextual factor in relation to academic engagement and outcomes; this may involve segmenting the local student population to reflect the diversity uncovered in the commuter student population and to provide further insights into the impact of studying locally, which may vary by discipline.

**Pre-entry engagement including marketing and recruitment**

R9: Ensure the needs and experiences of commuter students are represented and addressed in all pre-entry activities. This should aim to change the way the HEP portrays the student experience, and inform the decisions that potential commuter students make. The former should include more examples and experience of commuter students, and the latter should include providing accurate information about the costs, benefits and risks of commuting, and the wider value of engagement in academic, enhancement and social activities.

**Induction and transition**

R10: Help commuter students to feel included, and to have opportunities to meet other (commuter) students and develop support networks. As far as possible this should be integrated into mainstream academic activities that are prioritised by commuter students. Social media and other technology may also help students located away from the HEP to feel included.

**Learning, teaching and assessment**

R11: Identify and minimise the structural barriers to engagement, including timetables, submission of assessment, attendance and extenuating circumstances policies, placement practices, etc.

R12: Review and reduce the cultural assumptions about students’ residency and engagement, including issues such as lecture capture, provision of co-curricular activities in the evening, use of online resources, the role of social media, access to staff and resources on-site, etc.

R13: Provide greater transparency about the value of all types of engagement for academic, professional and personal outcomes, and help students to appreciate the relevance of different engagement opportunities to their longer term goals and aspirations.

**Learning resources and academic support**

R14: Use a commuter student lens to inform the provision of learning resources and academic support: make things available remotely, and provide flexibility on site, including the days and times on which services are provided.

**Employability skills, extra-curricular and enhancement activities**

R15: Analyse engagement in these services and activities by (sub-sets of) the commuter student population.

R16: Work with commuter students as partners to raise awareness of engagement opportunities and their value, and to provide engagement opportunities in more commuter student friendly ways (e.g. using technology, delivered where students live, developing new services tailored to their needs, encouraging, recognising and rewarding a wider range of enhancement opportunities, e.g. outside of the HEP).

**Representation and union roles**

R17: Review your processes and requirements using a commuter student lens to identify and address barriers to participation by students who commute to study. Think about timing, flexible (e.g. online) participation and the role of social media.

**HEP facilities, accommodation and estate**

R18: Consider how catering and space in the HEP accommodates the needs of commuter students. This includes opening times, access policies and spaces for commuter students to spend time, prepare food and leave possessions. It may also involve reviewing accommodation priorities, perhaps offering some on-site accommodation to commuter students on a flexible basis.

**Social opportunities**

R19: Look at introducing more commuter-student-friendly social opportunities, including activities during the day, or immediately after teaching ends, or which can be accessed flexibly or remotely.

**Financial and practical support for commuters**

R20: Identify some of the biggest financial and practical obstacles for commuters at your HEP and work with commuter students and other stakeholders to look for practical solutions.