

Commuting, Working, Attending and Performing: The changing route to academic attainment and progression during the first year (0243)

Barry Avery, [Daniel Russell](#), Hilary Wason  
Kingston University, UK

## **Introduction**

In recent years there have been significant changes in the profile of students entering university. Following the “massification” agenda (Trow, 1973, cited in Morgan, 2012) and the expansion of neo-liberal policies framing higher education (Meuleman et al., 2015), a new type of student has emerged whose university experience is at odds with the *going away to university* model. Holdsworth (2008) describes a two-tier divide between those who follow the traditional path and can ‘afford to go to university’ (pg. 1849) and those that by necessity stay local.

Studies investigating the factors influencing attainment and progression focus on students in the traditional model, revealing the importance of financial concerns, social aspects and student-tutor contact time (Yorke et al., 1997; Yorke and Longden, 2008), time management (Van der Meer, 2010), emotional aspects of transition (Wilcox et al., 2005) and class attendance (Kirby and McElroy, 2003; Stanca, 2006). However there are few studies that investigate how factors such as living at home, commuting to university and having a part-time job impact on the university experience of this new type of student.

The research site is a business school in a post-1992 university in outer London, where an increasing number of students sit within Holdsworth’s second tier category (2008), and the structures, systems and processes reflect the traditional old model. The purpose of this study is to investigate the day-to-day experience of students for whom success at university requires them to balance commuting, working and studying, and to explore whether current practices are appropriate and provide equality of opportunity for all students.

## **The study**

Data has been collected from 446 questionnaires distributed in various first year classes over successive days, from a cohort of just over 600 first year students. Participants were asked about aspects of their university life such as: living locations; travel time and mode of travel; part-time working hours; factors influencing attendance and overall levels of actual

attendance. This was merged with performance data resulting in a rich data set where associations could be drawn between aspects of their university life and student attainment.

## Findings

Our results confirm that the majority of our first year students fall into Holdsworth's local category (2008), with 55% living at home and only 24% of the first year students living in halls of residence. An analysis of where students live (figure 1) reveals a wide distribution of locations across the Greater London area including for some a 40 mile daily commute to and from university.

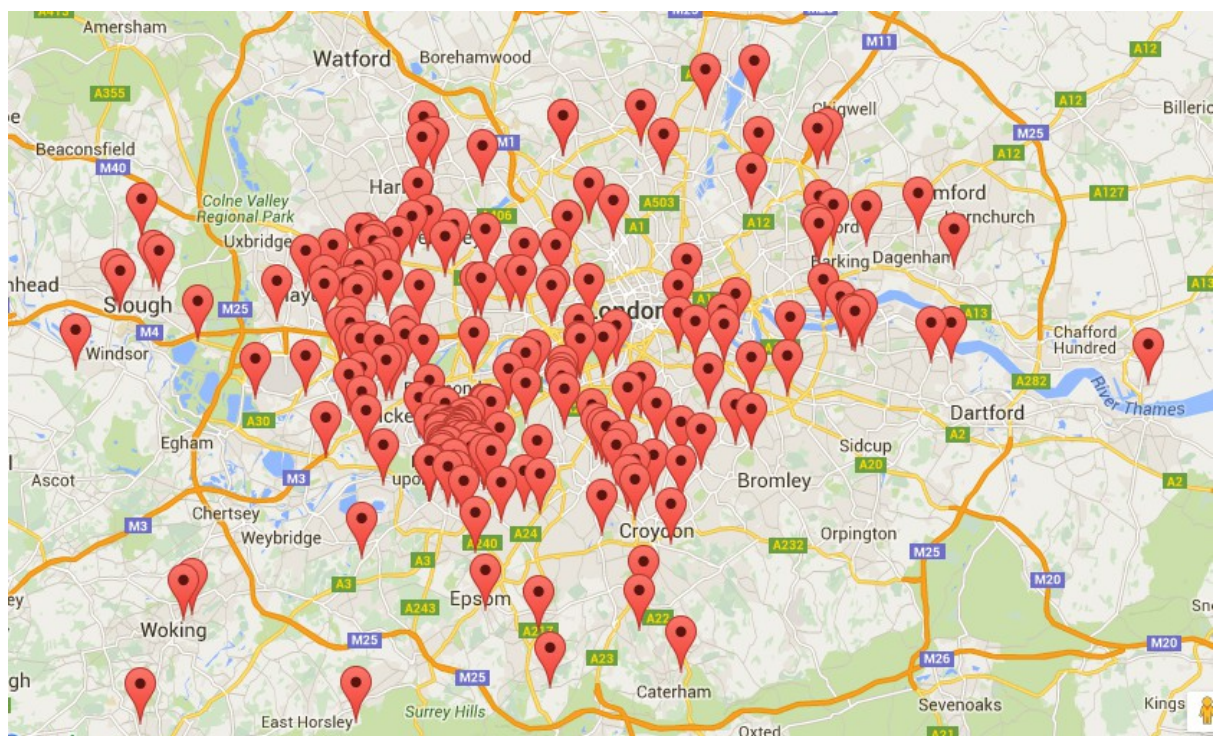


Figure 1: Living Locations of Students

The consequence of these living locations is that the majority of our students have a twice daily commute of at least 30 minutes. The figures are more stark for students who live at home where a significant majority have a total daily commute of two hours or more. Unsurprisingly, where people live has an impact on attendance, with students living in halls the most likely to describe themselves as having full attendance. Students living at home are less likely to attend classes but are more likely to find it necessary to work whilst studying.

The consequences of the increase in the number of 'local' students, who combine commuting, working and studying can be seen when the performance data is combined with

questionnaire data. Associations have been found between the day-to-day experiences of these students and likelihood of passing the first year; students living at home are more likely to not complete; students with a significant commute are far less likely to pass the first year compared to those with a shorter commute. Both these factors have an impact on attendance which itself impacts on progression and, unsurprisingly, on performance in general. On average students who claim full attendance achieve grades that are 6% higher than the others.

## Conclusions

A majority of students are staying in the parental home and commuting to university with a significant proportion required to finance their studies through part-time jobs. This impacts not only on their student life but specifically the amount of time students spend on campus, the ways in which they engage in learning and their ability to participate fully in university activities. Our findings suggest that despite the acknowledgement by our students that class participation increases learning, the number of commuter students necessitates a rethink of our perception of the student experience. We will report on our recommendations in relation to, inter alia, timetabling, group work and ways to create a pedagogically productive commute.

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