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Commuter students: are you local?

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Abstract: In recent years there have been significant changes in the profile of students entering university. The commuter student is less well defined and is not a homogenous group; they typically travel long distances to study, live far from the university campus, work part-time and have many competing pressures for their time. This longitudinal study has been collected from three successive years of first year students in a business school in a university in outer London. It focusses on student characteristics; aspects of their university life; living locations; travel time and mode of travel; part-time working hours and overall levels of actual attendance. When combined with performance data associations have been able to be drawn between aspects of university life and student attainment. Our findings show that the increasing pressures on commuter students are felt not just in the degree to which students can participate in university activities, but also in their performance.

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Introduction

In recent years there have been significant changes in the profile of students entering university. Although originally described using a two-tier divide where some can 'afford to go to university' (Holdsworth 2008 pg. 1849) and some by necessity stay local, a new type of student has emerged. This new type of commuter student is less well defined and is not a homogenous group; they typically commute long distances to study, live far from the university campus, work part-time and have many competing pressures for their time.

Factors influencing engagement and progression for first year students have included financial concerns, social and emotional aspects of transition (Wilcox et al., 2005, Yorke et al.,1997), as well as procedural aspects such as student-tutor contact time (Yorke and Longden, 2008) and attendance (Kirby and McElroy, 2003; Stanca, 2006). When framed as barriers to attainment (Baik, Naylor & Arkoudis, 2015), these can then in turn be associated with poorer retention rates (Thomas, 2012).

More recent studies on commuter students have been based on demographic data sets (Maguire and Morris, 2018), but the longitudinal study described here has been collected from successive years of

students directly, allowing the investigation of living location, employment and the factors that influence attendance over a period when the significant increase in fees and complexity in studying in higher education is starting to impact.

The research site is a business school in a post-1992 university in outer London, where an increasing number of students commute, work and have family commitments. The purpose of this study is to investigate whether current practices are appropriate and provide equality of opportunity for all students, when success at university requires them to balance these complex day-to-day experiences.

The study

This longitudinal study has been collected from three successive years of first year students in a business school in a post-1992 university in outer London, with an increasing focus on commuter students in each subsequent year (n=446, 155, 67).

In the first iteration the focus was on defining the commuter student characteristics, with questions concerning aspects of their university life such as: living locations; travel time and mode of travel; part-time working hours; and overall levels of actual attendance. The second iteration framed these questions with performance resulting in a rich data where associations could be drawn between aspects of their university life and student attainment; the last focussed on factors influencing attendance such as part time work and perceptions of worth.

Findings

Our results confirm that the majority of our first year students would fall into Holdsworth's local category (2008) and yet would not be local, with students living in a wide distribution of locations across Greater London including for some a 40 mile daily commute to and from university. This number has steadily increased year on year with some courses having more than 60% of students living with their parents. Commute time varies depending on cohort, with the number who report travel times of more than an hour varying between 45% and 60%. The number working alongside their studies has gone from 33% to 59%, with an increase in those working more than 13 hours a week, up to 33% compared to 24% three years ago.

Where people live has an impact on attendance, with students living in halls more likely to describe themselves as having better attendance. Perhaps counterintuitively, students living at home are more likely to find it necessary to work whilst studying, with a consequence that they are less likely to attend.

When the performance data is combined with questionnaire data, the consequences of this increase in commuting and working can be seen. On average students who live in halls achieve a 5% higher average grade across their modules than those who live at home - students living at home are more likely to not complete; 77% of students who travel at most 30 minutes passed all of their modules at the first attempt. This drops to 62% for students who travel for at least 90 minutes. Unsurprisingly attendance continues to impact on progression and on performance in general. Students who claim full attendance achieve grades that are higher than the others.

Conclusions

The number of students who live at home, commute and have part-time work has increased over the period of this study. The effects of this are felt not just in the degree to which students can participate in university activities, but also in their performance. Our findings suggest that we need to continue to rethink our perception of the student experience, with a focus on factors that can enhance the experience of these learners both within and outside the classroom. We will report on our recommendations in relation to these including steps the university is taking, along with suggestions about timetabling, assessment and ways to create a pedagogically productive commute.

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