

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (Included Submissions)

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Student Journeys: Academic Identity Among Commuting Students Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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**Research Domain:** Student experiences (SE)

**Abstract:** Commuting students may find it difficult to successfully develop an academic identity due to their distance from university cultures. Student identity and choices in engagement were investigated in this project on the geographical, cultural and emotional dimensions of students' journeys as they begin and progress through university. In 2017 and 2018, fifteen undergraduate students in one university department who identified as commuting to the university were interviewed one-to-one. Geographical and emotional distance from university, but closeness to family, affected commuting students' belonging and wellbeing. During pandemic-enforced remote learning, the experiences of commuting students changed in practice and we generated narratives with a further 10 students during 2019-20 and 2020-21. The (to date, ongoing) analysis offers a comparison between pre-pandemic and pandemic-era approaches to learning: students' changing understanding of autonomy, knowledge acquisition, discussion and collaboration; the importance of lecturer-student relationships and expectations, and using commuting students' resources as assets.

**Paper:** Background

Student identity and learning engagement were investigated in this project on the geographical, cultural and emotional dimensions of commuter students' journeys as they progress through university. Students who live at home are less likely than residential students to obtain a first class or upper second class degree (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, 2014). Multiple identities can clash with one another when students transition to university, perhaps more so for commuter students who retain previous identities, such as a family role or job. Student outcomes, experience and retention may be linked with sticking around on campus - extracurricular activities, campus jobs, good relationships with staff (Manley Lima, 2014). However, when no one can 'stick around' on campus, such as during pandemic-enforced closure, commuter students' experiences may offer opportunities to reflect on the support offered to all students.

Methodology

Drawing on elements of strengths-based approaches (Ghaye, Melander-Wikman, Kisare, et al., 2008; Yosso, 2005), one-to-one interviews were carried out by lecturers and student co-researchers in one university department in England in 2017 and 2018, with 15 undergraduate students who identified as commuting to the university (a journey of over 30 minutes). During pandemic-enforced remote learning, the experiences of commuting students changed and we generated narratives with a further 10 students during 2020 and 2021. The (to date, ongoing) thematic analysis offers a comparison between pre-pandemic and pandemic-era approaches to learning.

## Results

### Geographical dimensions: 'I'm not driving in just for that'

Commuter students undertook a careful cost-benefit analysis around deciding which classes and leisure/enhancement activities to participate in on campus. Commuting students were aware that they were missing something, but having weighed up the costs, they were satisfied with their choices. Some responses appeared indicative of a transactional approach to learning in which information acquisition, not dialogue or practical experiences, was considered the key element of class time.

### Emotional dimensions: 'It sort of frightens me just the idea of living away'

Stress was a defining feature for commuter participants and affected learning and relationships on campus. A bad commute could affect a student all day. Pre-pandemic, commuters experienced difficulties in trying to be successful in group work when it was not possible to meet the group regularly. Once online connections became necessary and normalised, students found ways to be closer emotionally, if geographically further apart, through video seminars and SMS chat groups. One commuter student pre-pandemic expressed that her wellbeing on campus was helped by knowing that at the end of the day she could see her mum. Family capital is a resource that should be considered favourably (O'Shea et al., 2017). Mature commuter students also added to the diversity of experience in a cohort, and could help younger students with contextual knowledge. During remote learning, students reported personal growth when they felt supported, by university or family.

### Cultural dimensions: 'I need to prove my worth'

The cultural dimensions of learning highlight the journey from 'not belonging' to belonging. The participants' voices resonate with research on the development of learner identities over time (Christie et al, 2008, 2016; Wong & Chiu, 2019), for instance learning habits (time management, amount of reading). It helped commuter students to know that they are similar to the rest of their cohort through opportunities for students to talk with each other about their learning journeys and academic identities.

## Conclusion

The ongoing analysis offers a comparison between pre-pandemic and pandemic-era approaches to learning: students' changing understanding of autonomy, knowledge acquisition, and collaboration; the importance of lecturer-student relationships and expectations, and using commuting students'

resources as assets. Belonging is assisted by engagement both in and outside class, but the commuter student participants told us they found it difficult or did not need the 'extra'. In the absence of the 'extra' during pandemic campus closure, alternative forms of connection between students developed. Students reassessed the value of collaborative learning and found ways to mitigate their isolation. When we return to on campus learning we should be realistic about how an academic identity is performed by commuter and residential students. The onus should not be on students to learn to ask for help (Wong and Chiu, 2019) but to embed dialogue and reflection on the support required for successful engagement into our practice (Raaper and Brown, 2020).

Resulting from the study, reflective activities on student identity and approaches to learning have been embedded into tasks and formative assessment. The study continues to build knowledge with lecturer group self-study, follow-up interviews as participants transition to upper years, and interviewing new cohorts.

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