62 'It made university possible:' exploring the opportunities created through online learning for commuter students to engage in higher education study

Rebecca Turner, Oliver Webb, Christie Pritchard

University of Plymouth, Plymouth, United Kingdom

Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

Commuter students represent approximately 25% UK university students. They often have caring responsibilities; work part time; and / come from lower-socio-economic backgrounds. Consequently, commuter students are potentially an important group for universities to focus on with respect to access and participation. Here we used first year students' residential status (i.e., whether they had relocated or were commuting to university) to capture data regarding students' attitudes toward online learning and academic engagement. Provisional analyses indicate differing behaviours in terms of study habits, peer collaboration and engagement with course-related activities according to residential status. They also indicate commuter students as holding positive dispositions toward online learning. These data may have implications for support that is provided to different student groups to create a sense of belonging and inclusion. We will consider this, as well as the role of online learning, in promoting the engagement of commuter students in this paper.

Full paper

Commuter students represent approximately 25% of those engaged in UK higher education (HE) (Maguire & Morris, 2018). These students often have caring responsibilities; work part time; and/ come from lower-socio-economic backgrounds - all characteristics reported to be underrepresented within HE (Thomas, 2020). Consequently, commuter students are potentially an important group for universities to focus on, with respect to access and participation. Interestingly, commuter students have been little researched and are often overlooked in policy rhetoric. This may partly reflect the lack of an agreed definition for commuter students (Maguire & Morris, 2018; Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022), and a presumption within UK HE that most students relocate into communal, campus-based accommodation (Thomas & Jones, 2017). By contrast, the norm in territories such as the USA is for students to attend their local HE provider (Pokorny et al., 2017; Thomas, 2020).

This study is based within a publicly funded, UK university, with a substantial proportion of undergraduates drawn from non-traditional or underrepresented backgrounds. Students drawn from underrepresented backgrounds can lack the social and cultural capital to succeed (Reay et al., 2010). Consequently, HE providers have made significant efforts to mitigate these challenges (Thomas, 2012). However, commuting adds a further level of complexity; for example, it has been reported that commuter students have a greater chance of not reaching their academic potential (Thomas, 2020). Various recommendations have been made to support commuter students (e.g. Thomas & Jones, 2017), with technology cited as potentially playing an important role (Buckenmeryer et al., 2016). The COVID-19 pandemic spurred technological advances in supporting students and engaging them in learning (UUK, 2022). Thus, it seems timely to examine the relationship between online learning and commuter students' HE experiences.

This study focussed on students in first year – a pivotal window for integration and success (Krause & Coates, 2008). Drawing on engagement scales developed by Krause and Coates (2008) for their seminal work on transitions to HE in Australia, an online survey addressed the following research questions:

- Is residential status related to attitudes towards online learning?
- Is residential status related to student engagement?

Methods

Commuter students were identified based on differences reported in home/ term time addresses, an approach used in previous literature (Webb & Turner, 2020). Though focussed on commuter students, data were also collected from first years who had relocated, to illuminate differing patterns of engagement according to residential status. Data were analysed using Chi-square tests to establish significant differences according to residential status.

Findings

Overall, commuter students viewed online learning more positively than their peers who had relocated. For example, they were more likely to agree that online learning 'improved skill development' (57% vs 47%), 'improved learning outcomes' (53% vs 43%) and 'provided a better learning experience' (53% vs 44%). Commuter students were also less likely to agree that online teaching 'doesn't offer the same social experience' (74% vs 82%), and that 'the student experience is not as good' (53% vs 66%).

 The engagement scales data highlighted different adaptive behaviours and attitudes according to residential status. The Intellectual Engagement scale considers attitudes to study (i.e. whether students find the subject interesting, are motivated to study). Here, no significant differences emerged according to residential status. The Academic Engagement scale provides insights into study habits (i.e. when students study, time management). Significant differences emerged for most items, with commuter students showing more agreement with markers of Academic Engagement than relocated counterparts. Commuter Students were less likely to report activities associated with the Peer Engagement scale (e.g., 'regularly working with classmates outside of class on group assignments'). Moreover, Commuter Students were less likely to report 'feeling part of a group of students and staff committed to learning'.

 Conclusions

These data suggest that residential status should receive greater attention in research and institutional monitoring. Differing patterns of engagement emerged depending on whether a student fully relocated or commuted to university. These data may have implications for support that is provided to different student groups to create a sense of belonging and inclusion. More tailored approaches may be required according to students' residential status. Finally, the data highlight commuter students' positive disposition towards online learning. Thus, further consideration should be given to how quality online provision can be used to optimise engagement and learning amongst students who reside at distance from their HE provider.

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