Connecting Commuters: Maximising University Campus and Online Resources for Student Success

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

Around 25% of UK students are commuters. This community spans 18-year-olds commuting to avoid debt to mature learners with caring responsibilities. Given statutory obligations regarding equitable access and participation they are an important group for universities to consider, however they have received little attention, stemming, perhaps, from (outdated) presumptions that most students relocate. Drawing on data captured from focus groups undertaken at two English universities, we place a spotlight on commuter students. This study aims to look beyond the commonly reported challenges, focusing, instead, on factors highlighted as contributing to their success. Specifically, we examine their use of university spaces, considering the role the campus plays in the commuter student experience. Findings should be helpful in informing institutional policies and shaping practices, ensuring they are supportive of, and recognise the diversity of needs, associated with what by many appears to be a seemingly homogenous group of students.

Full paper

Introduction

Traditionally 25% of UK students commuted for their studies, often drawn from groups underrepresented within HE, i.e. mature learners with caring responsibilities or first generation students fearful of debt (Maguire & Morris, 2018). However, in the face of the current cost of living crisis, more students are deciding to stay local (Adam, 2023). Regardless of their profile, commuter students (CS) challenge assumptions about the behaviour and motivations of university participants (Maguire & Morris, 2018). UK HE operates under an increasingly outdated notion that the majority of students relocate, with the academic and extra-curricular offer privileging this mode of engagement. Commuters make strategic choices about *how* to engage with their studies; prioritising course-related activities and avoiding attendance where the value is unclear (Thomas, 2020). For some, commuting heightens tension between studying and other life roles, impacting the identity commuters develop and the relationships formed with course peers (Thomas, 2020).

Existing narratives about CS are limited. They are positioned as inexperienced and disadvantaged in terms of preparedness for HE (Finn & Holton, 2019). These stereotypes overlook how CS exercise agency during their studies. Recent research confirms high levels of academic engagement amongst commuters (Turner et al., 2024). Transformation to the HE landscape, post pandemic, may benefit CS participation, making research into their experiences timely. Thus far, these students have received little research attention, stemming, perhaps, from divergent definitions of commuting, and presumptions that most students relocate. This paper therefore seeks to

- present profiles of commuter students to highlight the heterogeneity in the commuter student population.
- offer contemporary insights into their diverse experiences of engaging in higher education as commuter students.

Methodology

The study examines the profiles and experiences of CS in two post 1992 providers. Initially, institutional data sets were reviewed to examine the diversity of CS studying within each university, with post code data determining local / regional commuters. CS were then purposefully recruited to participate in focus group. They were prompted to discuss their motivations and experiences of commuting, the support and digital resources used to support their learning. Following the approach described by Ralls & Pottinger (2021), participants completed a participatory mapping exercise, annotating campus maps to indicate their use of university spaces. This study was informed by Wong's (2024) discussion of spatial belonging, which highlights the significance of both physical and digital spaces in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

Initial findings

Initial findings suggest CS populations follow the trends suggested by Maguire & Morris (2018) associated with post 1992 institutions (e.g. more women commute than men, and commuters are often mature learners). However, these analyses present a nuanced and complex picture of CS, with clear variations in disciplines studied by CS, compared to students who relocated. This nuance is rarely recognised within traditional institutional reporting mechanisms. Our analysis highlights the potential value of determining institution specific commuter student profiles, that differentiate between local / regional CS. We will highlight difference in the populations that commute locally and regionally, considering potential implications on their academic experiences.

Focus groups are currently on-going; we will use these data to discuss CS experiences within each study institution. We will examine the frequency of trips to campus, what determines their decisions regarding how they access their learning (in person or remotely) and the purpose of trips to campus. Attention will also be paid to the spaces and places (physical / digital) CS are using, and for what purpose. This will assist in ascertaining how commuters are constrained or liberated by the spaces

they are presented with. It is recognised that physical spaces are socially constructed, reinforcing traditional hierarchies that favour the dominant group. Equally, Soja (2010) notes underrepresented groups can redefine and restructure these spaces to suit their needs (Wong, 2024).   Post covid, digital spaces have been reported as having a profound impact on student engagement and belonging (Mendoza & Venables). In the face of increasingly numbers of students choosing to commuter, it is therefore timely to examine the role of physical and online spaces in the CS experience.

Concluding thoughts

An appreciation of the diverse profiles and experiences can be helpful for various stakeholders to identify factors contributing to CS success. These findings will be particularly helpful in informing institutional policies and shaping practices which would be supportive of and recognise the diversity needs of this seemingly homogenous group of students who form a significant proportion of the higher education student population.

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