

## Unseen and Underserved: Commuter Students in Higher Education Policy

Rebecca Turner, Oliver Webb, Claudia Blandon, Christie Pritchard  
University of Plymouth, Plymouth, United Kingdom

### Research Domains

Higher Education policy (HEP)

### Abstract

Commuter students are recognised as facing unique challenges that can impact their academic outcomes and employability. Despite their growing numbers, they are frequently overlooked in both national policy and institutional practice. This paper examines the representation and support of commuter students within national policy, specifically through Access and Participation Plans (APPs) in England. Through a documentary analysis of 42 APPs, this study explores how commuter students are defined, the support provided to them, and the stages of the student lifecycle where this support is targeted. Findings reveal a lack of consistent definitions and a predominant focus on continuation and attainment, with less attention to access and progression into employment. This paper highlights the need for more comprehensive and inclusive policies to ensure equitable access and success for commuter students in higher education.

### Full paper

### Introduction

Widening access is a prominent and longstanding policy agenda within higher education (Boliver 2013). It seeks to address historic and persistent inequalities in the participation of students. Following the introduction of variable tuition fees in England, those institutions seeking to charge higher fees were required to produce 'access agreements' detailing plans to promote participation for underrepresented students (McCaig, 2018). This focus on underrepresented groups resulted in target groups been determined, with institutions working with data proxies (e.g. Index of Multiple Deprivation as a proxy for social deprivation) to facilitate monitoring of the progress and outcomes of these students (Benson-Egglenton, 2022). This target group, data driven approach remains integral to the current mechanism to widening access - Access and Participation Plans (APPs). Though national policy is not seen as directly shaping or specifying how institutions seek to widen access, it does prompt institutions to make decisions on *how* to translate national directives

into the local context (Benson-Egglenton, 2022). Widening access documents, such as APPs, have been described as providing 'insights into the ways universities interpret and speak to policy.' Equally Ball et al. (2012) note that developing these plans represents a process involving 'struggle, mediation and recontextualisation', potentially providing insights into institutional priorities. Heeding this, a documentary analysis was undertaken of Access and Participants Plans to examine how an increasingly prominent constituent of the undergraduate population – commuters - were considered and supported by institutions.

Commuter students are frequently overlooked in national policy and local practice (Maguire and Morris; 2018; Maslin, 2025). This is an interesting oversight as commuter students are often drawn from the underrepresented groups widening access policy is seeking to support. Commuters can include mature students returning to education, those with caring responsibilities or working alongside their studies (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Finn and Holton, 2019). First in family students, who are risk adverse, are more likely to commute, as are minority ethnic students who live near to home to maintain community links (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Commuter students are reported as experiencing poorer outcomes, both in terms of their attainment and employability postgraduation (Artess *et al.*, 2014; Webb and Turner, 2020). Consequently, they are potentially an important group for universities with interests and statutory obligations regarding equitable access and participation to consider.

Through documentary analysis this study sought to address the following research questions:

- How are commuter students defined within Access and Participation Plans?
- What support are institutions providing for commuter students within Access and Participation Plans?
- Where, within the 'student lifecycle,' is such support targeted?

### *Methodology*

Using the 129 APPs from English HE providers, listed on the Office for Students website, a keyword search was undertaken of terms within the literature frequently associated with commuter students. These keywords were present, in varying number, in 42 plans, which were then subject to systematic documentary analysis.

### *Provisional findings*

In this paper, we will draw on extracts of APPs to examine the representation of commuter students within current widening access policy.

Out of the 42 providers, 6 were Russell Group and 36 post-92. The majority (32) were based in urban areas. This was not unanticipated; newer universities tend to report higher proportions of commuter students (Callender and Melis, 2022). However, it may also indicate the extent to which pre-entry activities associated with research intensive universities (Benson-Egglenton, 2022) may exclude commuter students. Equally, the accessibility of reliable transport infrastructure may impact *where* commuter students can access higher education (Kenyon, 2024).

Across the sample, there measures for identifying and defining commuter students varied considerably. Approaches included identifying the same term-time and home post code, distance travelled, travel time, staying outside university accommodation, and living at parental/own home. Within the paper, we will discuss the implications of this variability, exploring potential drawbacks of distance-based measures (Kenyon, 2024); the role of data in these definitions; and the extent to which these definitions heeded the wider intersectional characteristics associated with commuter students.

APPs prompt providers to consider key points within the student life cycle (OfS, 2023); for example, how they access university, or their continuation from first to second year. The documentary analysis indicated that for commuter students, attention was focused on interventions to support their continuation and attainment, whereas how they access university, and their future progression into employment, tended to be overlooked. This may indicate how implicit assumptions regarding the limited mobility of commuter students may shape institutions practices on access and progression.

We will conclude by considering how commuter students can be better served by widening access policy.