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Out of Sight, Out of Mind? The Marginalisation of Commuter Students in Higher Education Policy and Practice.

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Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

Abstract

The residential model of university attendance remains prevalent in UK HE, leading to policies and practices tailored to students relocating for study dominating discourse. Drawing on data collected through a novel participatory mapping methodology, this study explores the factors that contribute to the "othering" of commuter students. Our research reveals how, for example, sectorial policies on student finance or institutional attendance sustain and perpetuate inequities experienced by commuter students, whether overtly or implicitly. By uncovering such policies and practices, this study will consider the implications for future practice. As many commuters also align with groups described as 'underrepresented' (mature or first in family students), we will consider the relevance of the current, initiative-based approach to support underrepresented students' success and progression through higher education. The significance of our findings lies in their potential to inform more inclusive institutional policies and sector-wide reforms to create genuinely equitable learning environments.

Full paper

Whilst within many international contexts commuting is a normalised mode of attendance (Kobus et al., 2015), in the UK, leaving home for university is, as Auger (2019: 195) describes 'a deep-seated part of English culture'. This partly can be a consequence of *who* traditionally commutes. In addition to mature students returning to learning, who, due to wider commitments experience limited mobility (Hope and Quinlan, 2021), first in family students (Callender and Jackson, 2008) and

minority ethnic students are known to be risk averse, and typically remain in the family home. These are examples of students identified as underrepresented, who face barriers to fulfilling their academic potential (Callender and Mells, 2022). They are likely to struggle making friends with students who have a very different educational and life history to them (Brooks, 2008) - these are also experiences reported by many commuter students more generally (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022; Thomas 2020).

Whilst not seeking to play down the barriers students drawn from these marginalised groups face, the focus on demographic characteristic can overlook or obscure wider obstacles which students such as commuters, can face which cut across demographic categories. Indeed, as highlighted in the work of Artess et al., (2014) and, Webb and Turner (2020), the academic outcomes of commuter students, especially those travelling the longest distances, are often impacted by this act of community irrespective of their ethnic background, socioeconomic status and other demographic identities. As many underrepresented groups are also commuters, identifying the institutional and sectoral policies and practices which alienate commuter students would be helpful in developing a more inclusive approach for a broader group of disadvantaged students.

Drawing on data collected through a novel participatory mapping methodology, our study seeks to place a spotlight on aspects which can be alienating for commuter students' and likely impact these have on their higher educational experiences.

Methodology

The study examines the profiles and experiences of Commuter students of a post 1992 provider that attracts high numbers of commuters (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018; Finn and Holton, 2019). Following ethical approval, commuter students were recruited to participate in focus group discussions to understand their university experiences. During the focus group participants also completed a participatory mapping exercise. Following the approach described by Ralls and Pottinger (2021), participants annotated campus maps to indicate how they engaged with university spaces to lead into discussions of their sense of connection to university spaces. The data was collaboratively analysed by the students researchers supporting this study along with the project team.

Findings

Our study brought to fore a combination of sectoral and institutional discourses which have contributed to commuter students being overlooked and othered.

1. Sectorial othering - Relocating for university is one example of such discourse, and very much embedded in practice and policy of HE (Auger, 2019). Participants reported feeling removed and isolated from peers because of living at home. Further, students expressed that the National policy on student finance results in commuter students receiving a lower student loan than peers who relocate, overlooking the costs for travel and incidental costs incurred during their time on campus highlighting a further alienating sectoral policy experienced by commuter students.

2. Institutional othering – Participants highlighted institutional expectations of attendance (for example minimal accommodation for travel disruption, reluctance to allow virtual attendance) which they did not perceive as heeding their circumstances as commuters. The culture of presenteeism commuters experienced showed a lack of awareness of the wider commitments' participants may be juggling, the distances travelled and removed the autonomy of these students to identify their learning needs. Commuter students, like many students drawn from underrepresented groups, have numerous interactions in spaces that extend beyond those associated with their university and their learning. These are spaces that may appear nebulous and hidden from view, but, potentially, have a significant impact on the commuter students such as the spaces they inhabit whilst commuting and home as a space. However, participants of our study reported in spite of the engagement of home as a space for learning during the pandemic, universities have gone back to their delivery models and considerations of how these spaces could be utilised in their learning has been overlooked further exacerbating their othering experiences.

Concluding thoughts

An identification of institutional and sectoral practices which contribute to commuter students' othering experiences has the potential to inform more inclusive institutional policies and sector-wide reforms. For higher education institutions, addressing these underlying causes of othering is critical to creating genuinely equitable learning environments.