

Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Who is a commuter? Understanding the current conversation about commuter students and its implications for HE careers services

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Abstract: Commuter students are a growing topic of conversation in higher education policy. However, there are many variances in the ways that “commuter” is defined, and the specific institutional context makes a difference in the way we may choose to define commuter students. The challenges emerging as a result of commuting also vary depending on how we define commuter students. This paper looks at City, University of London’s population of commuter students, and considers the importance of accurate data, and addresses how HE careers and employability services can ensure they are meeting the needs of commuter students.

References

Maguire, D, and Morris, D, *Homeward Bound: Defining, understanding and aiding ‘commuter students’*, Higher Education Policy Institute, 2018 (HEPI Report 114)

Thomas, L and Jones, R, *Student engagement in the context of commuter students*, The Student Engagement Partnership, 2017

Neves, J, and Hillman, N, *2017 UK Engagement Survey*, AdvanceHE, 2017

Malcolm, D, *Reaching Home: Policy and practice for students living in the parental home*, National Union of Students, 2015

Higher Education Funding Council England, *Patterns in higher education: living at home*, 2009/2010 Issues Paper

Paper: Recent research varies in the way that “commuter” student is defined. Some studies have defined as “commuters” students who live in the parental home versus those who live in university accommodation (Thomas & Jones, 2017; NUS 2015), while others look at the amount of time it takes students to travel to university from their home (Neves & Hillman, 2017). Maguire and Morris (2018)

define commuter students as “those for whom travel to between their residence and principal study location materially affects their ability to succeed in higher education”, however they do not define “materially” in this context.

The barriers to engagement that commuter students face vary depending on the definition used. An accommodation type approach highlights personal barriers (such as caring responsibilities, reliance on local family and friend networks impeding engagement with the university community, and parental influence), while a travel time approach highlights physical barriers (time and financial restrictions on the ability to be present on campus).

Maguire and Morris present a matrix of accommodation type and distance to group students into four types that highlight the combinations of risk factors for lower engagement with the university (2018). With the growth of the conversation around commuter students in general, the HE careers and employability community needs to consider the impacts on students’ ability to engage with extracurricular career and employability skills development activities. There is also scope to investigate whether there is a gap in the employment outcomes of commuter students versus residential or local students.

Methodology

We looked accommodation type and travel distance for UK domiciled, full-time undergraduate students. These are the students who are most relevant to our institutional performance indicators, and also for whom the most complete data is available (the research did surface some issues with the data, which are addressed later in this paper). The data used include the students’ home address postcode, term-time address postcode, and accommodation type as provided to HESA in the annual HESA Student Return.

Accommodation Type

The proportion of UK-domiciled undergraduate students at City who live with their parents was 67.9% in 2017/18 and has grown by over 10 percentage points since 2011. Analysis of 2018/19 current students from internal student records shows 67.8% of UK-domiciled undergraduate students living in the parental home.

The second highest proportion of students live in “other rented accommodation” (2011-2016) or “own residence” (2017). The complete flip between other rented accommodation and own residence in 2017/18 after six years of consistent numbers indicates that there may be some issues in collecting this data, stemming either from data entry errors or students misunderstanding the difference between the two terms. HESA’s definitions for these two codes show that the definitions may not be clear:

- Code 7 'Own residence' includes a student's permanent residence, which may be either owned or rented by them.
- Code 8 'Other rented accommodation' refers to a more temporary arrangement eg. where a number of students each rent a room in the same house on a yearly basis.

Travel Time

There is no standard method or grouping for determining travel time to City from a student's accommodation. We undertook preliminary research in this area by obtaining student term-time postcodes from our internal student records system, calculating the travel time to City by public transport using the Bing Maps API, and grouping the results. This analysis is preliminary and should be done more robustly, however it shows that of UK-domiciled students with UK term-time postcodes, 36.9% live 30-45 minutes from City, 20.7% live 45-60 minutes away, and 13.69% live 1-2 hours away.

Using the matrix presented in the HEPI report, the majority of City's UK undergraduate students fall into the "low engagement, high travel" risk group – they are more likely to experience challenges related to both living with parents or independently, and challenges related to travel time.

Data Quality issues in HE student data

The data used in this report comes from term-time addresses stored on an institutional student records system. Only UK-domiciled undergraduate students have been included. International students are much more likely to live with other students in private halls or other rented accommodation, although some may live with UK-based family members.

This analysis has highlighted some concerns about the data that should be addressed in order to ensure robust and reliable information on student term-time accommodation. These issues are specific to City, however it is likely that other institutions many have similar concerns.

Term-time accommodation codes

It is necessary to understand how and when the term time accommodation codes are assigned in SITS. The complete flip between "other rented accommodation" and "own residence" from 2016 to 2017 is unusual. A similar pattern is present in a few other London universities (SOAS, Queen Mary, King's, HESA Student Returns as published on HeidiPlus), but is not widespread across the country. This may represent a true shift in accommodation patterns, but is more likely a misunderstanding of these codes either on the part of students or of administrators.

Accuracy of addresses

There were a number of inaccuracies in the address details, including inaccurate and outdated addresses. Although the total number of student records with one of these issues was relatively low compared to the total, they raise questions about the accuracy of the data overall. In order to ensure accurate data, institutions need to understand when student term time accommodation address details are added, by who, and if there are data quality processes in place to ensure that details are correct.

The number of UK UG FT students with term time addressed in far-flung locations implies that many of these addresses may be added at the time of application, before a student's accommodation at university is confirmed, and never updated. In addition to issues in commuter analysis, this creates problems with contacting students while they are at City, and with ensuring accurate details are passed to Alumni and HESA for national surveys after they have graduated.

Recommendations

For institutions with a large number of commuter students, it is worthwhile considering the barriers students may face to engaging with university activities. City is highlighted by Thomas and Jones (2017) as having “[drawn] our attention to students who had relocated to London to study, and who cannot afford ‘student accommodation’ and so live alone in non-student accommodation, and are often isolated, and cannot afford frequent travel to the institution.” They also found that “not surprisingly, our respondents reported lower rates of engagement in enhancement activities compared to academic engagement,” and “they prioritise academic engagement above and beyond enhancement and social engagement.”

With employability increasingly a concern of HE institutions, particularly City, we have considered that embedding employability skills in the curriculum is the most effective way to ensure that all students are able to access employability skills development regardless of their home situation and location.

References

Maguire, D, and Morris, D, *Homeward Bound: Defining, understanding and aiding ‘commuter students’*, Higher Education Policy Institute, 2018 (HEPI Report 114)

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