Understanding Barriers to Engagement for Commuter Students

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About us

Student Engagement is about empowering students to shape their own educational experience and creating excellent teaching and learning within a connected and cohesive higher education community.

The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP) champions and develops student engagement practice in the English higher education sector. Through our work, we provide expertise and insight, bringing together established and emerging knowledge and practice in order to equip student engagement professionals, practitioners and decision-makers across the sector with the knowledge and skills they need to make a success of student engagement in their context.

We are housed by the National Union of Students, and we bring together a wide-ranging group of representatives from sector bodies, HE providers and students’ unions, including HEFCE, QAA, HEA, GuildHE, AoC, LFHE, OIA and Jisc, to support and guide our work, and address shared challenges in student engagement at a national level.
What we’ll cover today

• Brief overview of the study

• Presentation, activities and discussion about our findings:
  • Concepts and definitions, data and measurement;
  • Student experiences;
  • Institutional responses;
  • Implications and recommendations
Aim, objectives, outputs of the study

**Aim:** To develop practical understanding about the engagement of commuter students in higher education, and how engagement can be enhanced by purposive actions of higher education providers (HEPs) and/or students’ unions (SUs)

**Objectives:**
- Challenges
- Current initiatives
- Ways to improve the engagement (and wider outcomes) of commuter students
- Guidance and resources for HEPs and SUs.

**Outputs:** Practically-oriented report and examples
Research process

• 168 expressions of interest, across UK, and Europe and Australia.
• 9 university research partners selected.
• 8 student-peer-researchers trained.
• 60 student interviews completed.
• 9 institutional visits, including: group interviews with staff about data, definitions, issues and institutional responses; examination of specific initiatives; workshop with students.
• 50 staff at participatory workshop.
Research Partners

1) Birmingham City University
2) Bishop Grosseteste University
3) City University London
4) Kingston University London
5) Newman University
6) University of Bradford
7) University of Manchester
8) University of Salford
9) University of Sunderland
Findings: concepts, definitions, data and measurement
Concept of student engagement

- Findings from interviews and literature: Lack of clarity; generally assumed to be a good thing
- Lack of an explicit, shared definition within and between institutions

“When we talk about student engagement, it depends a bit about who you’re talking to. So from our perspective I would think of it in terms of engagement with activities that we co-ordinate and run. I guess the general understanding would be around attendance at lectures, seminars, tutorials and that sort of thing, and physically being present in the institution.”
Different levels of student engagement

• More than attendance, at least in the academic sphere, needs to be more active
• Different levels of engagement, e.g. attending an event, leading a society

“It’s about being an active student in university life rather than, perhaps, a passive student. They don’t have to be involved in everything, but it’s about being active in class and being aware of student life. It’s also about engaging via social media. It’s about being part of it, rather than expecting university maybe just to happen.”
Different spheres of student engagement

We differentiated site/purpose of engagement:

• **Academic**: Engagement in their own learning.

• **Enhancement**: Engagement in co-curricular and enhancement activities (including representation, curriculum design and leadership roles) which contribute to personal and professional development.

• **Social**: Engagement in formal and informal sport, social and leisure activities with HE peers.
Different reasons for student engagement

Findings from the steering group and interviews cover a range of reasons:

• Contextual, depends on your institution context and student cohorts
• Attainment
• Retention
• Academic interest
• Belonging and community
• Commitment to programme and institution
• Personal, academic, professional growth
• Transformation
Concept of ‘commuter student’

• Concept of commuter student resonates with the experiences of staff in institutions regarding the engagement of their population (168 expressions of interest)

• But it is not widely used (2/9 of our research partners)

• There is a lack of shared definition of a commuter student:
  - Same term time and home postcode
  - More nuanced definitions (Manchester and Kingston)

• Conclusion: may be value in ‘segmenting’ the commuter student population to understand issues
Dimensions of ‘commuter student’

- Live at home students (UoM) – splits off-campus students into live at home, mature, carers, parents.
- Kingston – those who live outside the borough of Kingston
- Glasgow – those living in non-university accommodation
- Temporary commuter students – e.g. those on placement
- Students who live alone in non-student accommodation
- Diversity of characteristics, based on age, distance, mode of transport, urban/rural, etc.
- Intersectionality with other characteristics – first generation, BME, mature etc.
Segmenting the commuter student population

- Young / mature
- Local / distant
- Rural / urban
- Living with parents / living with family / living alone / living with other students
- Frequent / infrequent commute (e.g. BGU students on MA programmes and flexible degrees / CU students in biomechanical engineering who commute daily)
- Walk/cycle / public transport / driving
- Choice / necessity
## Influencing factors

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Choice</th>
<th>Difficulty</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Financial</td>
<td>Mode of transport</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family/cultural</td>
<td>Distance from HEP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental or caring responsibilities</td>
<td>Rural/urban</td>
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<tr>
<td>Personal preferences</td>
<td>Frequency of commute/course studied</td>
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Data collection and analysis

• The lack of shared definition of a commuter student permeates data collection and measurement
  • Same term time and home postcode
  • More nuanced definitions (Manchester and Kingston)

• Intersectionality with other characteristics:
  • Socio-economic status
  • Ethnicity
  • Age
Commuter student lens: commuter students’ perspectives
Developing your commuter student lens: discussion

What are the advantages, disadvantages and consequences of commuting in relation to:

- Academic engagement
- Engagement in enhancement activities
- Formal and informal social engagement
Perspectives on commuting

- Travelling is tiring, expensive and stressful
- Cost of food on campus
- Concerns about security
- Challenges with parking or public transport reliability
- Lack a place on campus – to keep things and spend time
- Lack of acknowledgement or recognition by the institution of their way of attending higher education
- It is difficult, but most feel they have little choice
- Some believe there are advantages too
Academic engagement

• Trips to the institution need to be worthwhile
• Lack of recognition or understanding from staff: e.g. late entry to lectures
• Penalties for late arrival to assessments
• Carrying books and equipment around is tiring
• Internet access can be poor in rural areas, making online engagement difficult – although valuable
• Accommodate group working
• Placements do not take into account where students live
• Generally seem to be ‘good’ students
Engagement in enhancement activities

• Networking events are often in the evening, and this makes it more difficult to attend
• Also may need additional clothes which have to brought to campus (e.g. for sport)
• Representation may expect that you are on campus for training, meetings etc.
• Flexible enhancement activities such as being an ‘ambassador’ seem common
• Students don’t always appreciate the value of enhancement activities, perhaps believe the qualification is sufficient
Social engagement

• Tend to only get to know students on your course. This is strongly influenced by nature of the course and L&T
• Not all students recognise the value of learning informally
• Lack of social network can make it difficult to participate in social activities (i.e. no one to go with)
• Lack of space on many campuses for informal congregation and sense of belonging
• Clubs and societies tend to meet in the evenings. Lack of daytime activities
• Difficult to bring things on to campus – e.g. sports kit, instrument etc. as nowhere to store them
• Less social engagement than other students
Conclusions about commuter student engagement

• The students we interviewed largely view themselves as ‘good students’
• Many see commuting as a positive choice which allows them to focus on their studies without distractions
• They tend to do far fewer enhancement and social activities, but they do not view this negatively
• Risk they do not see the value of participation beyond the academic sphere, prioritising academic work over other activities
Does this matter?

Drawing on literature there is evidence that commuter students have lower rates of success in HE:

• Students who travel have lower rates of academic engagement (What Works? 2)
• Students who live at home are less likely to get a 2:1 or 1st class degree
• Living more than 30 minutes from campus is correlated with greater academic failure
• Students who live at home are less likely to get a graduate job
Interventions and solutions
Discussion:
Commuting

- Share information about travelling – best routes, parking, and possibility of sharing travel
- Bus service – between campuses, to centre of town, etc.
- Awareness raising and campaigning regarding security issues
- Sharing information between commuting students – pre-entry lunch, regular meetings, online/social media
- Lockers and common room
- Travel bursaries
- Childcare on campus
Academic engagement

- Interventions to develop ‘cohort identity’, e.g. weekend school
- Blocked timetable
- Later start
- Lecture capture or other ways of ‘catching up’ (argument that they have paid for it)
- ‘Students as partners’ or similar projects
- Placements: related to where students live
- 24 hr opening of library (and other facilities)
- Electronic books and journals
- Software and equipment at home to aid study
- Lenient policies on exams, extensions and re-sits
Engagement in enhancement activities

- Day-time activities
- Enhancement timetabled into the gap on the timetable
- On-line training and meetings for reps
- Locally-based volunteering
- Commuter student connecters
- Employ students on campus
- Awareness raising about the benefits of enhancement activities
- Accreditation models to collect points for activities (irrespective of where activities are undertaken)
Engagement in social activities

- Common room and space for commuter students, including facilities such as a kettle and microwave and space to spend time
- Events during the day
- Mentoring to help integrate students not in halls of residences
- Connectors in local areas
- Facebook or social media to connect students in same geographical areas
- Opportunity to stay overnight on campus for affordable price
- Travel bursary for when staying on campus late
Reflection

Reflecting on what has been discussed today to think about conclusions, implications and recommendations. Note down:

• 3 key things you have discovered about commuter student engagement
• What could these 3 things mean for you in your context?
• At least one recommendation for your institution and one for your union.
Recommendations

• Agree a definition that is applicable for data collection and relevant to practice
• Find out about your commuter student population
• Recognise expectations and experiences of different commuter groups
• Use the ‘commuter student lens’ to examine student experience and outcomes and look for solutions
• Provide opportunities to recognise and validate commuter students and give them a voice in unions and institutions
• Provide information for commuters
• Raise awareness of the benefits of engagement, especially the academic and employment benefits
• Consider the merits and risks of targeted versus mainstream solutions
Stay in touch!

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