

***'I use my time more wisely...'* The implications for learning and teaching in higher education of more 'commuter students'**

Thomas, Liz^a

^aFaculty of Education, Edge Hill University, UK

Abstract

In the UK students have traditionally moved away from home to study in higher education (HE), but this is changing as a consequence of greater participation rates, and higher tuition fees – and student loans - which may influence the behavior of lower-income students. This research undertook 60 qualitative interviews with students of all ages who defined themselves as 'commuters', who continue to live at home whilst studying. The study found that while the students largely viewed themselves as 'good students' aiming to engage fully in their academic studies, the stresses and strains – and cost and time – involved in travelling - resulted in students evaluating the utility of a trip to campus, considering whether their resources would be better spent studying at home. In addition, these students tended to be less engaged in 'enhancement' activities, and had very little social engagement with HE peers. Nationally commuter students achieve less good outcomes, being more likely to withdraw early, achieve lower attainment and less likely to secure graduate employment on completion. This paper considers the implications for student engagement and teaching and learning of a larger commuter student population, in an effort to achieve greater equity in student outcomes in UK HE.

Keywords: *Commuter, live-at-home, student engagement, academic engagement, learning and teaching, equity*

1. Introduction

1.1 Context

In the UK there is a long tradition for higher education (HE) students to move away from the family home and live in scholarly communities within or close to the academic institution. This however is changing, as a consequence of the expansion of the sector, which is approaching a mass HE system with around 50% of young people progressing into HE, including more from lower socio-economic groups. In addition, and arguably more significantly, changes to the funding of HE have shifted responsibility from the State to individual students and their families making HE more expensive; living at home may offer substantial savings on accommodation costs.

The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2013) identified four types of student outcomes: achieving a degree (retention and completion); achieving a first or upper second-class degree (attainment); achieving a degree and continuing to employment or further study (employability); and achieving a degree and continuing to graduate employment or postgraduate study (graduate progression). Live-at-home, or 'commuter students', have less good outcomes than other, non-commuter students against each of these measures. One possible explanation is that commuter students have lower levels of engagement in their HE experience (Social Market Foundation, 2017). This paper explores commuter students' perceptions and experiences of engagement, and the implications for learning and teaching.

1.2 About the empirical study

The study was commissioned by The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP), a cross-sector entity in England which champions and develops student engagement in HE. The aim was to explore the 'engagement' experiences of commuter students, and how institutions respond to them. The study used a multimethods research design, combining a review of institutional documentation, collating further examples from across the sector, and nine institutional case studies comprising data analysis, student interviews, staff discussion groups and student workshops. This paper draws on the 60 student interviews undertaken by trained and supported student-peer-researchers in each university. The interview schedule covered: information about the student; details of their commute; discussion of their engagement in HE; barriers to engagement; and ways of improving commuter student engagement.

1.3 Student engagement

Student engagement is a widespread and popular concept in UK HE, but it does not have an agreed meaning (Trowler, 2010). Each institution has its own interpretation of student

engagement, and the extent to which meanings are shared across an institution is questionable. Coates (2007, p122) describes engagement as “a broad construct intended to encompass salient academic as well as certain non-academic aspects of the student experience”, comprising of: active and collaborative learning; participation in challenging academic activities; formative communication with academic staff; involvement in enriching educational experiences; feeling legitimated and supported by university learning communities. In this study we developed the concept of different sites of engagement, and focused on commuter students’ experiences in the academic, enhancement and social spheres. ‘Academic’ refers to students’ active involvement in their learning; ‘enhancement’ relates to participation in co-curricular and enrichment activities which contribute to personal and professional development; and ‘social’ engagement includes informal peer interactions and participation in more formally organized sport, social and leisure activities with peers.

1.4 Commuter students

Commuter students is a widely used and understood term in the US where the majority of students (more than 85%) are commuters (Horn and Berktold 1998), but there is not an explicit or shared definition in the UK. In this study, interview participants self-identified themselves as ‘commuters’ based on whether or not they travel to their place of study from their family home which they lived in prior to entering HE (although for institutional data analysis a comparison of home and term-time postcodes was used). The study included undergraduates and postgraduates; full and part-time students; and mature and young students.

2. Findings and discussion

2.1 Commuting to study

The experience of commuting was, on the whole - although not universally - experienced negatively. Students found commuting time consuming, tiring, expensive and stressful. None of this is especially surprising, what is remarkable however is that students reported having little or no idea before deciding to be a commuter how much time they would spend travelling or how much it would cost. For example, some students talked about commuting to save money, but they had not factored in the cost of travel – or the other disadvantages (i.e. time). Once at their place of study, commuter students found other practical challenges relating to their lack of a physical space on campus to store belongings and spend time (compared to residential students who have access to their rooms and shared living spaces). Commuter students were forced to carry their possessions with them, which is not only inconvenient, but it reduced the activities they engaged in on campus. Furthermore, they had no informal

'I use my time more wisely...' The implications for learning and teaching of 'commuter' students

space in which to meet peers, eat food from home and relax; they tended to be forced to use study spaces or cafeterias – requiring them to either be studying or spending money. These practical issues served to mark commuter students out as different to the norm or the expectation of the institution, and contributed to a feeling of not fitting in or 'belonging'.

2.2 Academic engagement

The students we spoke to generally saw themselves as good students, who were academically motivated and engaged, (indeed, this is a limitation of our methodology, as we necessarily interviewed the more engaged students). Students discussed their academic aspirations of achieving a good degree, and their commitment to attending the compulsory taught sessions and accommodating other academic requirements, such as course-related group work activities. However, the majority of interviewees qualified their academic engagement to some extent, recognizing that the practical challenges of the commute could result in them not attending everything. In short, a trip to the institution needed to be worthwhile – as is reflected in the title of this paper. Students identified a range of factors that contributed to their decision about whether or not it was worth attending, for example, the quality of the teacher (including classroom management and disciplinary issues); the number of academic sessions during the day; the perceived value of different sessions; and the structure of the day including duration and gaps between taught sessions.

Students identified academic staff attitudes as being problematic. Students felt there was an assumption that they should live near to the institution, and a preference for face-to-face communication, when other methods could work just as well. Students who were delayed travelling could experience humiliation on entering a lecture late, or even be excluded. Students were frustrated by a requirement to submit work in person and late notice about cancelled sessions, they were docked marks for arriving late for assessed sessions, and found professional placements took no account of their home location, sometimes making travel impractical or very costly. In most institutions it was frowned upon if students tried to re-arrange their timetable to facilitate travel arrangements. Staff in some institutions were perceived to be reluctant to make course content (including lectures) available digitally, were slow at answering emails, or encouraged students to come in to see them, and generally prioritized face-to-face engagement and made it difficult for students to engage in other ways.

2.3 Enhancement engagement

'Enhancement' refers to engagement in opportunities to develop personal and professional capabilities, and which contribute to graduate outcomes. Our respondents reported lower rates of engagement in enhancement activities compared to academic engagement – despite

indicating they were aspiring to graduate jobs – but their effort centred on the successful completion of their academic tasks. Those enhancement activities that commuter students did engage in were ambassadorial and mentoring roles, which were more closely aligned to their academic departments, and which typically took place during the day.

The reasons for lack of engagement in other enhancement activities included events taking place in the evening, which required students to hang about, make additional travel arrangements and sometimes to bring additional clothing or equipment on to campus. Leadership and representative roles within the Students' Union were also problematic due to practical challenges associated with commuting, especially late at night. In addition, however, students seemed to not value and therefore prioritise enhancement activities. For example, there seemed to be a widespread lack of awareness of the premium prospective employers place on extracurricular activity and the development of graduate attributes. Some mistakenly believe that academic success is sufficient to realise their graduate career ambitions, and they therefore explicitly prioritized their academic engagement over enhancement activities. This suggests students lack a more complex understanding of the more implicit aspects of HE success and progression into the graduate labour market.

2.4 Social engagement

Our commuter students had significantly lower levels of social engagement than the student population more generally. The disadvantages of commuting - time, cost, effort, transport limitations – were the main barriers to greater social engagement. Thus, commuter students only tended to get to know other students on their courses, as they were not generally engaged with other activities and groups in the wider institution. Opportunities for engagement within an academic programme are strongly influenced by course type (including number of contact hours), learning and teaching styles and how many other students are on the course. The lack of a social network could subsequently make it difficult for commuter students to participate in other social activities (as they had no one with whom to attend events). These problems were compounded by the lack of formal social activities available during the day, which appeared to be at least in part due to a lack of institutional space. And the lack of space places further constraints on informal socialization. This reflects institutional assumptions that socialization can occur in the evening, in students' unions and accommodation facilities. It must also be noted however that many commuters accorded low priority to socialising with HE peers, preferring to meet friends nearer to where they lived. Some students explicitly restricted themselves to engagement in the academic sphere, as they did not want social engagement to have a negative impact on their academic effort and achievement. This indicates a lack of appreciation of the educational value that peer networks may have on student engagement, belonging, retention and success in HE (Thomas 2012).

'I use my time more wisely...' The implications for learning and teaching of 'commuter' students

3. Implications for learning and teaching in higher education

The curriculum – incorporating organizational issues, contents and design, and pedagogy and assessment - could be used to address many of the engagement challenges students experience as a consequence of being a commuter student. The curriculum is, as Kift *et al* (2010) note, 'within our institutional control'. This is not to suggest that the curriculum can overcome the practical challenges of commuting *per se*, but organization, design and pedagogy could support students to use their time more wisely by reducing the need for unnecessary travel, increasingly the value of time spent on campus, and facilitating wider student engagement. This needs to be underpinned by the development of staff understanding of, and attitudes towards, commuter students, and the development amongst commuter students of an appreciation of the contribution of engagement in the wider student experience to academic success and progression to graduate employment.

3.1 Organisational issues

Organisation refers to the practical ways in which the curriculum is organised and delivered, and for example, the extent to which this takes into account the complexity of (commuter) student lives. Consideration of the experiences of commuter students suggests that decisions might be made regarding whether delivery is online, or face-to-face, or another hybrid or blended approach. It might also be considered whether material is offered in different formats, including for example lecture capture, allowing students the option of attending in person or viewing the lecture remotely. Another practical issue relates to how the face-to-face sessions are timetabled, for example whether teaching is 'blocked' into a reduced number of days, whether the start and finish times are considered in relation to the travel issues faced by commuter students, or whether there are opportunities to personalise the timetable (e.g. through a choice of seminar groups, or labs etc). Curriculum organisation can also be used to facilitate engagement in enhancement and social activities, for example, by timetabling co-curricular enhancement activities, and providing explicit time within the days on campus for formal and informal socialising with peers, both during induction and beyond.

3.2 Contents and design

The engagement of all students should be planned into the curriculum design and contents, to ensure the offering is as inclusive as possible. This includes planning feasible and relevant opportunities for engagement and by providing opportunities for real-world and authentic learning informed by student interests – which may occur in the communities students live rather than within or local to the university. The curriculum can extend staff and students' knowledge of each other's interests, aspirations and circumstances, and be used to develop

understanding of the contribution of enhancement and social engagement to academic achievement and graduate employment outcomes. With this in mind the contents can be designed to provide opportunities for students to spend time with each other – and with staff – to enable them to develop a network of social enrichment and support, and participation in enhancement activities. In addition the development of academic and professional skills can be embedded into the core curriculum to facilitate engagement.

3.3 Pedagogy and assessment

Pedagogy and assessment can be used to enable all students – including commuter students - to engage. For example, more active learning strategies (e.g. peer learning or problem-based learning) provide opportunities for students to get to know each other and develop learning communities or support networks. The pedagogy should avoid making assumptions about students and provide opportunities for staff and student interaction. Inclusive learning employs a variety of learning, teaching and assessment approaches, and students may have choices (e.g. whether to study on campus or remotely). Commuter students can be encouraged to set up study groups in local neighbourhoods, or to use technology and social media to facilitate collaborative learning beyond the classroom. With regards to assessment it can be helpful to build different assessment methods into the programme, provide choices about the method of assessment, and use formative approach to help students explore assessment requirement and to improve their assessment skills. A simple assessment ‘unpacking’ task within a taught session (see Cureton, 2017) can provide all students with greater understanding of what is required, and reduce the frustration students experience when they are undertaking independent learning in isolation, as will be the experience of many commuter students.

4. Conclusions

There are growing numbers of commuter students in HE in the UK. These students have lower outcomes – completion, attainment and (graduate) employment, which could be explained by lower academic, enhancement and social engagement. Interviews with commuter students suggested that they prioritised academic engagement, as they were highly committed to achieving a good academic outcome, which in turn was anticipated to result in graduate employment outcomes – but students made value judgements about what to attend and engage with. Commuter students seemed to under-value the importance of engagement in enhancement and social activities, and may have had less than optimum engagement in academic activities (e.g. collaborative learning with peers outside of the classroom). Learning and teaching in HE have the potential to transform the engagement – and potentially

'I use my time more wisely...' The implications for learning and teaching of 'commuter' students

the outcomes – of commuter students. This involves raising awareness of the wider value of engagement, i.e. in enhancement and social activities, and providing more accessible and flexible opportunities to help students make the best decisions about effective ways to use their time wisely. In the above some practical suggestions of the implications for learning and teaching are noted, in relation to curriculum organisation, curriculum contents and pedagogy and assessment. Comparable engagement by commuter students in all spheres however, requires commuter students to be recognised as legitimate and equal members of the HE community. This must be reflected in, for example, staff attitudes and institutional spaces, and requires wider cultural change in many HE providers in the UK. Otherwise commuter students will continue to make individual and potentially poorly informed decisions about engagement which may impact negatively on their outcomes.

References

- Coates, H. (2005) The Value of Student Engagement for Higher Education Quality Assurance. *Quality in Higher Education*. 11 (1), pp. 25–36.
- Cureton, D. (2017) *What works? Student retention and success report*, University of Wolverhampton. Wolverhampton: University of Wolverhampton
- HEFCE (2013) Higher education and beyond. Outcomes from full-time first degree study. 2013/15. Bristol: HEFCE
- Horn, L. and Berkstold, J. (1998) *Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Education Institutions: 1995-96*. Washington, DC: Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education (NCES 98-084).
- Kift, S., Nelson, K. & Clarke, J. (2010). Transition Pedagogy: A third generation approach to FYE – A case study of policy and practice for the higher education sector. *The International Journal of the First Year in Higher Education*, 1(1), 1-20.
- Social Market Foundation (2017) *On course for success? Student retention at university*. London: UPP Foundation <http://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/UPP-final-report.pdf> (accessed 12/1/18)
- Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. London: Paul Hamlyn Foundation.
- Trowler, V. (2010) *Student engagement literature review*. York: Higher Education Academy