

About PEP

The Postgraduate Experience Project was one of 20 projects funded through HEFCE’s £25m Phase 1 Postgraduate Support Scheme which was designed to test ways of supporting progression into taught postgraduate education in England. A description of PEP can be found in Briefing Paper 1. The literature defines a commuter student as someone who lives off campus and not in university accommodation (Jacoby, 1989). However, there is no definition of the ‘distance’ that constitutes someone being a commuter student. For the purpose of this briefing paper, a commuter student is someone who has to travel 5 miles or more to their university at which they are studying. Research highlights that the commuter student can face a number of difficulties that their non-commuter counterpart does not. This can include spending less time on campus due to travel demands resulting in difficulties accessing social and support systems, which in turn can impact on their ability to succeed (Tinto, 1993; Stephens 2013; Morgan, 2013). This briefing paper reports the findings of respondents in the PEP project classified as commuter students and their engagement with university.

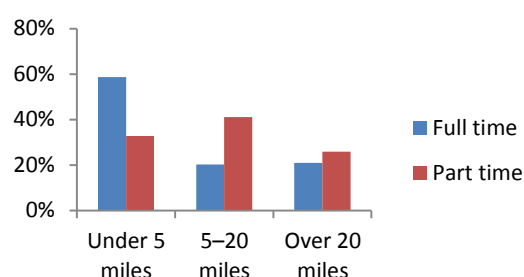
Distance to University

In the Entry to Study survey, 1217 respondents provided the distance they travelled from where they were living to their university. Of the respondents, 54.3% were living *under 5 miles*, 23.8% *between 5 and 20 miles*, and 21.9% *over 20 miles*. When these three groups were analysed by the different socio-demographic variables, a number were found to be notable.

Influential variables

- Full-time respondents were more likely to live less than 5 miles than those studying part-time (see Figure 1).
- Male students were more likely to live less than 5 miles away from the university (58%) in comparison to female students (48%).
- Students living less than 5 miles from the university were more likely to be living with friends or by themselves in university or rented accommodation.
- Students living between 5-20 miles away from the university were more likely to be living with parents in owned accommodation.
- Students living over 20 miles away from the university were more likely to be living with parents in owned accommodation, by themselves or with a partner in a rented/owned accommodation.
- EU and OS were more likely to live less than 5 miles from the university (77.6% and 80.6%) compared to their UK counterparts (51%).
- Those under 25 were more likely to live less than 5 miles away from their place of study compared to those over 40 years of age.
- Those entering postgraduate study straight from university were more likely to live under 5 miles compared to those entering straight from work where more likely to live 10-15 miles away or over 35 miles.

Figure 1



Engagement with university

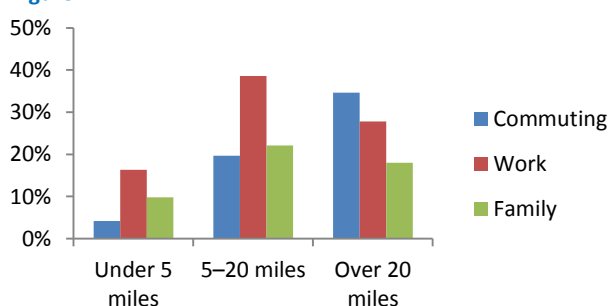
Reasons for choosing university

Respondents were asked to select from 21 options their top three reasons for choosing to study at their current university. ‘*Location of the institution*’ was one of the most cited reasons for the overall sample. However, when considering the three distance categories, respondents living between 5-10 miles away were more likely to choose this reason (66.6%) than the respondents living less than 5 miles (44.3%) and over 20 miles (44%). Respondents living less than 5 miles were less likely to select the reason ‘*delivery of the programme is flexible enough to fit around my life*’ (12%) in comparison to respondents living 5-20 miles (21.7%) and over 20 miles (24.1%). Although the sample size was small, ‘*reputation for good social life*’ was more likely to be selected by respondents who were living less than 5 miles (11.6%) than by the ones living 5-20 miles (5.9%) and over 20 miles (7.1%).

Concerns at studying at PGT level

Respondents in the Entry to Study Survey expressed concerns of studying at postgraduate level (see Briefing Paper 7). The most common concerns were ‘*coping with the level of study required at this level*’, ‘*committing more time to study*’, ‘*getting on with fellow students*’ and ‘*fitting in with the university culture*’. However, commuter respondents were more likely to be concerned about ‘*having a long commute to attend the course*’, ‘*difficulties in fitting the course around my existing work commitments*’ and ‘*difficulties in fitting the course around family commitments*’ (see Figure 2).

Figure 2



Concerns on starting university

Similar results were found when asking students to think about how they felt about starting their postgraduate courses. Of the 8 options provided, no noticeable differences were found for 'coping with the standard of work', 'getting involved in university life', 'making friends', 'managing money', 'looking for suitable accommodation', 'looking for my health and welfare' and 'coping with balancing life demands and study'; However, 11.1% of students living 5-20 miles away from university, and 24.8% living over 20 miles were not confident about 'coping with the travelling to university' in contrast with just 4.1% of students living less than 5 miles. Issues surrounding commuting came up in the focus groups. Comments included:

'In all honesty, I am really struggling with university this time around. The workload is what I was expecting, but doing this with a lot of travelling is really hard. I am not coping very well'.

'Travelling to and from university is really hard. I travel by train and the train times don't fit my schedule very well. Some days I am at university for 11 hours and don't get home until 9.45pm'.

'I just don't have the time to make friends what with my workload and commute, undertaking part-time work and looking after my family....'

Intentions to use university support services

When asked about what university support services they might use whilst studying their postgraduate course, no relevant differences were found except for using the 'sports facilities'. Around half of all students living less than 5 miles intended using these facilities in comparison to just 26.9% of students living 5-20 miles away, and 33.5% of students living over 20 miles away. No differences were found between distance to university and the intention to use 'health and wellbeing', 'academic support', 'housing advice', 'financial advice', and 'careers and employment'.

Cost of being a commuter student

The cost of commuting was raised by respondents in the Finance Survey as one of the major costs they incurred after their fees and accommodation. They stated that free on-campus parking would be very helpful, and financial assistance through the provision of discounted public transport and small loans to enable them to buy a year's travel card (cheaper than a daily ticket) would make a huge difference in helping them with their commute.

Impact of commuting demands on scholarship uptake

PEP found that not only did the demands of commuting impact on respondents who had started their studies, but it also impacted on applicants deciding whether study was possible. PEP provided a range of full and part-time fee scholarships as part of the project (see Briefing Paper 2). Of the 331 applicants offered a scholarship, 31 declined it. Some of the reasons cited included travel difficulties (e.g. cost and parking) and combining travel with study demands (e.g. inflexible timetable). One example is provided below.

Part time, 100% fee scholarship

'I am writing to advise you that, regrettably, I will not be in a position to start the course that has been offered to me. I would like to thank you both for helping me, but having made several dummy runs to access the university, I have come to the conclusion that the reality of the travel distance, expectancy of the course workload and the fact I still have a day job will, in reality, be too much.'

Issues for further consideration

This briefing paper has highlighted that commuting is an important factor in the recruitment, progression and success of applicants and students participating at postgraduate level study. If postgraduate study is to widen and become sustainable, the issues surrounding commuter students' requires serious consideration along with other characteristics that these individuals are more likely to possess such as being part-time and mature. PEP has highlighted that those studying part-time and mature are more likely to be from the lower social classes, first generation and UK domiciled (see Briefing Paper 15).

References

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