Student engagement in the context of commuter students

Liz Thomas and Robert Jones

TSEP The Student Engagement Partnership

Contents

About us

The Student Engagement Partnership

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.

Find out how we can support you at

tsep.org.uk

team@tsep.org.uk

@TSEPartnership

/TSEPartnership

Liz Thomas

Liz Thomas is an independent researcher and consultant for higher education and Professor of Higher Education at Edge Hill University.

Liz has nearly twenty years' experience of undertaking and managing research about widening participation, student retention and success and institutional approaches to improving the student experience. She is committed to using research to inform national and institutional policy, practice and evaluation, and has developed and led change programmes to facilitate this.

In 2013 Liz contributed to several studies for HEFCE and the Office for Fair Access to inform the National Strategy for Widening Access and Student Success. In 2014-15 Liz worked with CFE Research to explore and develop an evaluation framework for widening participation on behalf of HEFCE, as well as completing the three-year formative evaluation of the National Scholarship Programme. In 2016 Liz was appointed to the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) panel, with a remit to focus on widening participation.

Liz is currently working with the Higher Education Academy, Action on Access and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation to deliver and evaluate the 'What Works?' student retention and success change programme, building on the 'What Works?' programme of 2008-2012, which sought to identify effective approaches to improving student retention and success. Other current work includes working with the Equality Challenge Unit to review and improve the participation of students from equality groups in higher education.

Robert Jones

Dr R. D. Jones is a researcher in the fields of higher and further education and widening participation. He is the author of Student Retention and Success synthesis published by the Higher Education Academy and the introduction to widening participation synthesis. He has previously worked at the University of Birmingham researching learning and teaching, access to higher education and student retention and success. Rob then took a post at the University of Edinburgh, where he researched knowledge transfer in the context of the Scottish HE sector. He has strong editorial skills, having worked on publications for the Higher Education Academy and as book reviews editor for the journal Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning.

Foreword

Since 2013 TSEP have worked across the higher education sector in England, to champion and develop student engagement practice. Through our work we have identified common themes and challenges faced by higher education providers and students' unions. During a period of wide ranging and fast paced change in the higher education landscape, concerns relating to how to engage 'commuter' or 'travel in; travel out' students has been repeatedly raised with us. It is a constituency of students that is growing and whose experience and attitude towards their education could render traditional forms of engagement inappropriate for a new generation of diverse student experiences.

Following our successful partnership with Liz Thomas Associates in delivering the HEA funded research into student perspectives and experiences of independent learning in 2015, we are proud to present this research as our latest collaboration, incorporating a team of trained student peer-researchers into our action research approach.

It was clear to us that a deeper understanding of the barriers to engagement faced by commuter students, and examples of emerging practice and ideas to address these challenges was needed. This has been reinforced by the response and participation we have received throughout this research study, from our initial call for evidence to our national workshop to explore the emerging findings. We hope that the findings and recommendations herein support colleagues in their work in devising successful approaches to engagement that are inclusive of the broad diversity of their students.

Acknowledgements

The project team would like to thank everyone who contributed to this research study, in particular the student peer-researchers:

- Ramota (Temi) Adelakun
- Pooja Dhunna
- Jennifer Haddrell
- Ayesha Khan
- Gillian Millane
- Heather Piggott
- Ola Tony-Obot
- Jessica Ward

We would also like to thank the institutional partners and their students' unions who undertook preliminary work, organised, hosted and contributed to our visits; and recruited and supported the student peer researchers:

- Birmingham City University
- Bishop Grosseteste University
- City University London
- Kingston University London
- Newman University
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bradford
- University of Manchester
- University of Salford
- University of Sunderland

We would also like to thank the commuter students who participated in interviews and who attended the workshops and all the institutional and union staff and elected officers who contributed to the visits and national workshops. In addition we are very grateful for all the interest and offers of support we received throughout the project, including those people who took the time to tell us about the work of their institutions and unions, and the Office for Fair Access who undertook a search of Access Agreements to inform this study.

Project Team

- Liz Thomas (LTA)
- Tobin Webb (TSEP)
- Ellie Russell (TSEP)
- Robert Jones (LTA)
- David Malcolm (NUS)

Executive summary

1. Executive summary

1.1. About the study

Traditionally in the UK higher education students have re-located to their place of study and lived in student accommodation, with an element of communal living – and learning. Increasingly however students are continuing to live at home and commute to their place of study. This applied, qualitative study focuses on understanding 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). It addresses the following research objectives:

i. To describe the nature of the challenge higher education providers (HEPs) face in relation to the engagement of commuter students.

ii. To document the kinds of initiatives that providers and students' unions (SUs) are developing to increase student engagement.

iii. To identify what works to improve the engagement (and wider outcomes) of commuter students.

iv. To develop guidance and resources for HEPs and SUs wanting to enhance the engagement of commuter students.

There are not however universally or widely accepted definitions of either commuter students or student engagement. We defined commuter students as:

Those who travel to their higher education provider (HEP) from their parental or family home, which they lived in prior to entering higher education - rather than having re-located to live in student accommodation (or close to the HEP) for the purposes of studying. This includes full-time and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate, and in all disciplines and types of institution.

Commuter students in this study were self-selected, and included: undergraduates and postgraduates; full and part-time students; and mature and young students; in all types of HEP.

We used a broad and inclusive understanding of student engagement, based on areas of activity:

i. Academic: Engagement in learning.

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

iii. Social: Engagement in formal and informal sport, social and leisure activities with HE peers.

Our study used a mixed methods research design which consisted of:

i. A review of institutional documentation, in particular Access Agreements, to pinpoint and assess the issues identified by HEPs in engaging commuter students, and the interventions and approaches currently being implemented.

ii. A sector-wide call for further examples of how commuter students are engaged across the dimensions identified above (academic, enhancement and social).

iii. Nine institutional case studies to explore issues and approaches, and the ways in which these are shaped by context.

iv. Interviews with 60 commuter students, undertaken by trained student-peer researchers within case study institutions.

v. A participatory workshop to explore interim findings and develop recommendations for practice.

We worked in partnership with the following universities, who recruited and supported student-peer researchers and put themselves forward as institutional case studies:

- Birmingham City University (BCU)
- Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU)
- City, University of London (CUL)
- Kingston University London (KUL)
- Newman University, Birmingham (NUB)
- University of Bradford (UOB)
- University of Manchester (UOM)
- University of Salford (USA)
- University of Sunderland (USU)

The research was undertaken ethically and student identities have been protected. All interviews and discussions were transcribed and examined for emerging themes. The implications of these themes were then analysed in relation to student and institutional contexts. Many of the findings were subsequently tested at the participatory workshop.

1.2. Findings

Student engagement

Across the sector and within institutions there is not a fixed definition of student engagement, nor a consistent way of interpreting what it constitutes, and this was reflected in our case studies. Rather understandings were context-specific and sometimes not explicit; there were inconsistencies both between and within institutions.

Despite the lack of clarity, staff were in broad agreement with the literature that engagement is positive and that deeper engagement is preferable to more superficial forms. Conversely commuter students identified what they perceived to be the risks of some types of engagement (particularly social engagement) and the advantages of being less engaged in - and distracted by – non-academic activities. Furthermore we found commuter students to be more willing to engage in the academic sphere compared to the enhancement and social spheres. They often viewed wider engagement as 'nice to have' rather than an 'essential' element of a successful HE experience. Staff tended to view this lack of engagement beyond the academic sphere as more problematic.

Students tended to view engagement as synonymous with attendance, rather viewing it as a graduated spectrum. Staff by contrast viewed engagement in broader terms, recognising that mere attendance was not sufficient to qualify as a meaningful form of engagement, at least in some contexts.

Commuter students

The concept of commuter students resonates with people across the sector, and seems to be tapping into concerns that staff and unions have about certain groups' superficial levels of engagement, but it is not currently a widely used term. Within this study institutions mostly chose to formally identify commuter students by comparing their home and term-time postcodes, although the limitations of this approach were acknowledged. Other terms in use include 'live at home' students and 'learn and go' students. Commuter students is a broad term, covering a heterogeneous group, raising questions about the utility of looking a commuter students as a single group. Indeed, different approaches to segmentation have been used, and we suggest that it may be useful to think consider how much choice students exercise when deciding to commute, together with how much difficulty the commute itself entails. It is how these two variables interact which seems to influence types and levels of engagement.

Data collection

Most institutions do not currently analyse their data by commuter status, and most of the case study institutions undertook an analysis of their student population by commuter status to inform this project. Data collection and analysis is hindered by the lack of a clear definition of a commuter student, resulting in the use of a proxy measure, generated from the comparison of home and term-time postcodes. To obtain more accurate and meaningful data, institutions could collect information by asking students about residential/commuting arrangements at their point of course registration. It may also be useful to look at the relationship between commuter student status and other characteristics, such as socio-economic group, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, entry qualifications and tariff points and subject studied. Some institutions have found it useful to map the location of their commuter students to help support the ways in which they engage commuter students. There is however a risk of obscuring important aspects of a student's background and the analysis could hide more than it reveals. Data collection should therefore be considered in relation to the development of an appropriate definition(s), taking into account intersectionality with other student characteristics, and segmentation of the commuter student population.

Commuter students' experiences and views

We explored students' experiences and views of commuting, and about engagement in the academic sphere, enhancement activities and socially.

Students told us that commuting is tiring, expense and stressful, and many had not fully appreciated this before they became commuter students. Some of the difficulties were related to mode of travel, for example parking issues, traffic jams and accidents and cancelled services. Other challenges were however concerned with the institutional context and culture, and could be things that higher education providers could address. Students identified security issues associated with walking, public transport and driving, and while not all of these are within the control of HEIs there are some steps that could and should be taken to improve the security of vulnerable students.

Once on site students experienced a lack of 'place' to spend time, store things, and where they could 'belong', and they also felt restricted by the food available. More generally there was a sense of 'othering' as being a commuter student is not acknowledged within the institutional discourse; it is assumed that students are living nearby, with other students, and engaging in a hectic social life. The institutional culture and discourse do not assume that students are making tiring journeys to study, with little time or inclination for wider engagement – and this is compounded by TV and media images of students relaxing and socialising, not struggling and studying. But many students feel that have no choice but to commute for a range of reasons.

The students in our study say they prioritise academic engagement, but it was widely acknowledged that a trip to the institution needs to be 'worthwhile', thus students are making value judgement about the efficacy of attending taught session. They also generally managed to participate in group work, but they needed to fit this in with travel arrangements and other commitments. Students were critical of the attitudes towards teaching staff who reinforced and reflected in the institutional stance that commuting is not the norm, and is not to be accommodated through small adaptions. Students who are delayed travelling can face humiliation and worse and are particularly disadvantaged in relation to assessments that start first thing in the morning. Students again pointed to the specialist equipment and clothing required for some subjects, which is difficult to carry around. Students in rural areas pointed to the limited internet speed, and thus that online is not a panacea in this context. Students on professional programmes identified the additional challenges of professional placements which do not take into account their home location when placements are allocated.

Students tended to undervalue and under-participate in enhancement and social activities. It should be noted however that a significant number participated in ambassadorial and/or mentor type roles within their academic department. Such roles may appeal to commuter students because they have links within the academic sphere, and the activities tend to take place during the day.

Enhancement and organised social activities are also captured by the institutional discourse of residential students, with events being organised almost exclusively in the evenings, and assuming physical presences on site. Informal socialisation was hindered by the lack of 'free' places – meaning both available and without indirect costs (e.g. for refreshments). Plus, the lack of a social network – having nobody to go with - could inhibit participation in social and enhancement activities. Finally, we identified that commuter students prioritised academic engagement at the expense of enhancement and social engagement, seemingly unaware of the advantages of these types and sites of engagement to their implicitly and explicitly cited goals of achieving the qualification and secure an enhanced employment outcome.

Solutions

Students were more likely to identify solutions to help them engage through the workshops rather than individual interviews, but much of the focus was on overcoming the challenges of commuting, and changing some aspects of provision of engagement opportunities.

In summary, students suggested the following ways to reduce some of the challenges of commuting:

- Sharing information about travelling, e.g. through social media.
- Developing a commuter student community, which could be faciliated by pre-entry or induction events, regular meetings and through online forum or social media.
- Provision of lockers and a common room providing a practical and emotional base for commuter students.
- Bus service, e.g, a transport hub, to reduce of the costs, stresses and risks of travelling

- Security campaigns, especially in relation to personal safety, although vehicle security was raised in one workshop.
- Financial support such as subsidisied travel, bursaries and a taxi fund.
- Improved parking, including more parking spaces, more permits, free parking and longer opening hours of the car parks.

Students identified ways in which their academic engagement could be enhanced, including:

- Commuter student-centered timetabling.
- Lecture capture as an alternative way of engaging with academic sessions that they have paid for.
- Greater opportunity to study at home, including provision of software and hardware, on-line resources, faster internet access, and the option of submitting assignments remotely.
- Greater awareness and acknowedgement of commuters by staff within the academic context.

The more limited suggestions regarding enhancement and social activities included:

- Day-time activities.
- Enhancement activities timetabled into the gaps on the timetable.
- Flexibility, including local opportunities, about when and where participation takes place.
- Enhancement and social activities within the academic context.
- Commuter student space, such as common room or base to spend free time in.

Institutions focused more on information provision and promoting networking, rather than structural or cultural changes. i.e. focus is on getting students to make more informed decisions and adapt to fit into, rather than changing attitudes and opportunities on site. There are however some examples about ways in which the academic curriculum and resources have been re-organised and designed with commuter students in mind. Student partnerships have proved an effective way of engaging some commuter students, while extending this work through mentoring helps to engage a larger proportion of this group – if they take up the opportunities that are offered. There is some interest in offering off-site opportunities (e.g. volunteering and social activities), but this is under-developed in the majority of institutions. There is still a great deal that could be done, and one would expect that institutions will become more 'commuter-friendly' over time, using this report as a starting point. We identified interventions that fall into ten broad categories:

i. Pre-entry information and marketing about commuting to inform decision-making,
ii. Pre-entry and induction activities and opportunties to meet other (commuter) students.
iii. Creating an institutional identity and sense of belonging for commuter students .
iv. Targeted information, opportunties and support for commuter students once in higher education.
v. Re-organising the academic curriculum, delivery and resources to support the engagement of commuter students.
vi. Student partnerships, using students' expertise and resources to promote engagement and belonging by commuter studnets.
vii. Space for commuter students on site.
viii. Financial and travel support for commuter students.
ix. Inclusive strategies, including the use of technology and social media.
x. Research about the experiences and 'needs' of commuter students.

Details of specific interventions in relation to each of these categories are provided in the full report.

1.3. Conclusions, implications and recommendations

Is commuting a barrier to engagement?

Commuting to study presents practical challenges for many commuter students, and students were not always aware of these issues when they chose to participate in HE in this way. These practical challenges impact on academic, enhancement and social engagement in ascending order, and thus potentially 'commuter students' is a useful lens to use to examine student engagement. It should be recognised however that the group is diverse, and may benefit from a more nuanced definition, additional segmentation and looking at the relationship with other student characteristics such as class, ethnicity and age.

What are the factors that inhibit engagement?

Students lacked – or failed to access – information about the realities of commuting, and they also encountered structural and cultural issues within many higher education providers that negatively impact on the engagements of students who commute.

Structural barriers include the timetable which is designed to maximise the use of the estate, but which is often not commuter-student friendly (early starts, late finishes, large gaps and teaching sessions spread over all or most of the week); policies and practices that either penalise commuter students (e.g. late arrival penalties, or the requirement to submit assessment in hard copy) or that do not facilitate their engagement (e.g. lack of lecture capture and other supportive technology for blended and flexible learning and more widespread use of social media); lack of spaces on site for commuter students to store things, spend time and engage in social and enhancement activities during the day; expensive and often income-generating accommodation and catering on site; lack of on-site parking and links to public transport hubs; etc.

Cultural barriers relate to the attitudes and ways of doing things that pervade and inform practices within HEPs. Thus, there is a sense in which commuter students are invisible: they are not widely recognised and acknowledged, even in institutional marketing and communication pre- and post-entry. The culture also informs the 'dominant discourse' or assumptions that are held about where students live and how they should and will want to engage. For example, the unthinking expectation that students are able to attend networking events in the evening, or that they have somewhere to leave their lab coats and boots. There appears to still be a cultural 'gold standard' which reflects the experience of the majority of academics and senior professional staff employed in higher education – and perhaps this needs 'disrupting'.

There may also be shortcomings in commuter students' appreciation of the value and purpose of participating in higher education. The research participants largely viewed themselves as 'good students', who prioritised their studying with a view to gaining their academic qualification and progressing into employment, but engagement was selective, based on their response to the question: is it worthwhile? This value judgement extended to enhancement activities and social engagement. Staff expressed concern that some commuter students may not appreciate the wider benefits of engagement - e.g. to achieving their academic and career aspirations.

Commuter students appear to have lower levels of engagement across all three types and sites of engagement, but in the main they prioritise academic engagement above and beyond enhancement and social engagement. This raises the following questions:

Are commuter students unable or unwilling to engage?

It is difficult to conclude why commuter students do or don't engage, and it is impossible to generalise across a diverse group. Our evidence however suggests that there are very practical barriers to engaging beyond the academic sphere caused by the travelling itself, and reinforced by the structure and culture of many higher education institutions, which assume a traditional model of student residency and engagement. There are other practical issues that also impact on engagement such as family, caring and employment responsibilities. But there is also an element of not necessarily unwillingness, but perhaps lack of awareness of the benefits of engaging.

Do commuter students have lower rates of success in higher education?

A widely held, if often implicit, view is that commuter students – especially those exhibiting other non-traditional or disadvantaged characteristics – will experience less good outcomes from higher education. The evidence from a range of national studies suggests that commuter students have lower outcomes than students who re-locate to study, and this difference is particularly pronounced for younger students, in summary.

- Travelling to study negatively influences engagement, but there is no data about the retention of commuter students.
- Students who live at home are less likely have achieve a first or upper-second class degree, and more likely to experience academic failure.
- Students who lived away from home were more likely to be working in a job being undertaken only or mainly by graduates.

To what extent does lower academic, enhancement and/or social engagement explain differential outcomes?

In short we do not have conclusive evidence from this study that lower rates of engagement are causally related to lower outcomes for commuter students. There is however a significant body of institutional, national and international evidence pointing to the various benefits of student engagement. We do however need to develop our evidence base about the relationship between student engagement and outcomes, and whether or not all forms of engagement are of equal importance and value. Staff in the interviews were concerned about imposing their views of a successful student onto contemporary (commuter) students, but equally there is a risk of not conveying to students and helping them to develop understanding of the potential benefits of engagement on their academic, employment and personal development and lifelong outcomes.

Recommendations

The recommendations consider both:

- What can be done to improve commuter students understanding of and ability to engage? And
- How can and should higher education providers be more inclusive of commuter students?

They are directed towards specific processes, and those actors who have responsibility for, or interest in them.

Student experience or student engagement staff within HEPs and SUs

R1: Challenge the institutional discourse and culture which assumes that all students are residential. Provide opportunities to recognise and validate commuter students and give them a voice in unions, institutions, faculties, departments and courses.

R2: Agree a definition of commuter students that is applicable for data collection and relevant to policy and practice within your institution, perhaps using the definition and evidence in this report as a starting point for discussion.

R3: Initiate work to find out about your commuter student population, and to recognise the expectations and experiences of different commuter groups.

R4: Use the 'commuter student lens' to examine student experience and outcomes and collaborate with commuter students as partners to look for effective solutions.

R5: Work towards both structural and cultural change, as well as helping students to better understand the implications of commuting and different types of engagement, both pre- and post-entry.

Data collection and analysis at national and institutional level.

R6: Undertake initial analysis of your commuter student population (e.g. based on the same home and term-time address). Consider how this population is distributed by subject, level and mode of study; the outcomes for commuter students; and the intersectionality of the commuter student population with socio-economic status, ethnicity, age, gender, disability and entry qualifications and tariff points in relation to distribution and outcomes.

R7: Disseminate the findings of your analysis within the institution and sector, to raise awareness of the issues and inform policies and interventions. This may involve presenting data visually, or in an interactive format to meet the needs of different groups.

TEF policy makers, panel, assessors and institutional submissions

R8: Be explicit about the importance of 'local students' as a contextual factor in relation to academic engagement and outcomes; this may involve segmenting the local student population to reflect the diversity uncovered in the commuter student population and to provide further insights into the impact of studying locally, which may vary by discipline.

Pre-entry engagement including marketing and recruitment

R9: Ensure the needs and experiences of commuter student are represented and addressed in all pre-entry activities. This should aim to change the way the HEP portrays the student experience, and inform the decisions that potential commuter students make. The former should include more examples and experience of commuter students, and the latter should include providing accurate information about the costs, benefits and risks of commuting, and the wider value of engagement in academic, enhancement and social activities.

Induction and transition

R10: Help commuter students to feel included, and to have opportunities to meet other (commuter) students and develop support networks. As far as possible this should be integrated into mainstream academic activities that are prioritised by commuter students. Social media and other technology may also help students located away from the HEP to feel included.

Learning, teaching and assessment

R11: Identify and minimise the structural barriers to engagement, including timetables, submission of assessment, attendance and extenuating circumstances policies, placement practices, etc.

R12: Review and reduce the cultural assumptions about students' residency and engagement, including issues such as lecture capture, provision of co-curricular activities in the evening, use of on-line resources, the role of social media, access to staff and resources on-site, etc.

R13: Provide greater transparency about the value of all types of engagement for academic, professional and personal outcomes, and help students to appreciate the relevance of different engagement opportunities to their longer term goals and aspirations.

Learning resources and academic support

R14: Use a commuter student lens to inform the provision of learning resources and academic support: make things available remotely, and provide flexibility on site, including the days and times on which services are provided.

Employability skills, extra-curricular and enhancement activities

R15: Analyse engagement in these services and activities by (sub-sets of) the commuter student population.

R16: Work with commuter students as partners to raise awareness of engagement opportunities and their value, and to provide engagement opportunities in more commuter student friendly ways (e.g. using technology, delivered where students live, developing new services tailored to their needs, encouraging, recognising and rewarding a wider range of enhancement opportunities, e.g. outside of the HEP).

Representation and union roles

R17: Review your processes and requirements using a commuter student lens to identify and address barriers to participation by students who commute to study. Think about timing, flexible (e.g. online) participation and the role of social media.

HEP facilities, accommodation and estate

R18: Consider how catering and space in the HEP accommodates the needs of commuter students. This includes opening times, access policies and spaces for commuter students to spend time, prepare food and leave possessions. It may also involve reviewing accommodation priorities, perhaps offering some on-site accommodation to commuter students on a flexible basis.

Social opportunities

R19: Look at introducing more commuter-student-friendly social opportunities, including things during the day, or immediately after teaching ends, or which can be accessed flexibly or remotely.

Financial and practical support for commuters

R20: Identify some of the biggest financial and practical obstacles for commuters at your HEP and work with commuter students and other stakeholders to look for practical solutions.

Introduction

2. Introduction

There is a long tradition in the UK of higher education students living in scholarly communities, studying and socialising with academics and peers, and thus acquiring the values and practices of academia. In the last century this idea became quite dominant - the post-war years saw the number of students living at home decline from approximately 40% in 1945 to around 10% in the mid-1980s. More recently, however, these figures changed. By the mid-2000s approximately 20% of students were living in the parental home and, since the introduction of tuition fees, this percentage can be expected to increase further (Malcolm[1], 2014, pp5-6).

This study builds on and extends the work of Malcolm (2014), conceiving of 'commuter students' in a wider sense not restricted to those who live in the parental home[2]. It explores their experiences and how institutions respond to commuter students. This is an applied research study which aims 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). More specifically the research has addresed four research objectives:

i. To describe the nature of the challenge higher education providers (HEPs) face in relation to the engagement of commuter students.

ii. To document the kinds of initiatives that providers and students' unions (SUs) are developing to increase student engagement.

iii. To identify what works to improve the engagement (and wider outcomes) of commuter students.

iv. To develop guidance and resources for HEPs and SUs wanting to enhance the engagement of commuter students.

2.1. Defining the focus of the study

This study is based on two key concepts: student engagement and commuter students. Here we present our initial understanding and definitions of these terms as they shaped – and were shaped by - our study.

2.1.1. Student engagement

Suffice to say, student engagement is a widely used term with a range of interpretations and applications[3]. There are also many co-terminus concepts in use (such as student involvement, students as partners, co-producers, student representaion and student voice, etc.). Definitions of student engagement are discussed in Thomas (forthcoming), and it is noted that within and across institutions there are different understandings of student engagement, reflecting both the academic literature and the position of The Student Engagement Partnership (which rejects the idea of a universal definition of engagement[4]).

We thus began this study by using a broad, inclusive and losely defined idea of student engagement, based on areas of activity:

i. Academic: Engagement in learning.

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

iii. Social: Engagement in formal and informal sport, social and leisure activities with HE peers.

2.1.2. Commuter students

Similarly, there is not an explicit and shared definition of a 'commuter student' in the UK context (commuter students is a more widely used and understood term in the US where the majority of students – more than 85% - are commuters[5]).

1 Downloaded at www.tsep.org.uk/resources

2 The definition of commuter students is discussed below, and is subject of further exploration through the research process.

3 Trowler, V. (2010) Student engagement literature review. York: Higher Education Academy

4 P6. The principles of student engagement. The student engagement conversation 2014. www.tsep.org.uk/resources

5 Horn, L. and Berktold, 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).

In Scotland Browitt and Croll[6] defined local commuter students as 'first year students who live outwith institution-maintained accommodation'. In the English context this would be seriously misleading, as it would include students living in purpose-built student properties and other shared accommodation in the private sector, which is now widespread amongst students. In order to undertake satisitical anaysis in the UK context Woodfield[7] defined 'local' in relation to distance: less than 30 miles between pre-HE home and the higher education provider (HEP hereon). But this is recognised as somewhat arbitary and, in partiuclar urban and rural locations and associated transport systems contribute to the feasibility or otherwise of commuting over a distance of up to 30 miles. An alternative approach is therefore to consider the time taken to travel to the HEP, which reflects a discussion in the Student Room[8] - and a US definition takes into account 'dorm status' and 'distance' from the HEI.[9]

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) includes 'local students' as a category in the contextual data about HEPs which will provided to assessors "to take into account the specific context in which the provider is operating"[10]. Local students are defined as those whose home address is within the same Travel to Work Area (TTWA) as their location of study (DfE, 2016, p25). The current criteria for defining TTWAs[11] is that generally at least 75% of an area's resident workforce work in the area and at least 75% of the people who work in the area also live in the area. There are 228 TTWAs; boundaries are non-overlapping, are contiguous and cover the whole of the UK. They vary in size from a minimum working population of 3,500, many areas are much larger – and it is worth noting that the whole of London and the surrounding area forms one TTWA. This definition takes no account of whether or not a particular student has relocated, or whether they commute to study.

In a qualitative study such as this one, it is more straight-forward to simply ask people if they are commuter students. In other words do they travel to to their HEP from their parental or family home (which they lived in prior to entering higher education), rather than having re-located to live in student accommodation (or close to the HEP) for the purposes of studying. We provided the following broad guidance:

> *Those who travel to their higher education provider (HEP) from their parental or family home, which they lived in prior to entering higher education - rather than having re-located to live in student accommodation (or close to the HEP) for the purposes of studying. This includes full-time and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate, and in all disciplines and types of institution.*

Participants in this study are therefore self-selected, on the basis of whether they personally regard themsleves as a 'commuter student' in relation to this definition.

We should also note that our study includes all 'commuter students': undergraduates and postgraduates; full and part-time students; and mature and young students; in all types of HEP. TSEP suggest that improving levels of engagement by commuter students is an issue in contrasting contexts, e.g. not only college-based HE, but for postgraduates too. For example, Morgan and Direito[12] found that 14.7% of postgraduates (18.6% of UK postgraduates) who completed their survey

6 Browitt, A. and Croll, N. (2015) Enhancing engagement of local 'commuter' students at induction to support transition and promote student retention and success. Paper presented at The 2nd International Conference on Enhancement and Innovation in Higher Education 2015, Glasgow, 9-11 June, available from http://enhancementthemes.ac.uk/conference/conference-resources, accessed 19/1/16.

7 Woodfield, R. (2014) Undergraduate retention and attainment across the disciplines. York: Higher Education Academy

8 See for example: http://www.thestudentroom.co.uk/showthread.php?t=2569625, accessed 21/1/16.

9 For example, see http://youngadults.about.com/od/College-Lingo/g/What-Is-A-Commuter-Student.htm, accessed 19/1/16.

10 DfE (2016) Teaching Excellence Framework: year two specification. London: DfE https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/teaching-excellence-framework-year-2-specification

11 Extracted from; http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20160105160709/http:/www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/geography/beginner-s-guide/other/travel-to-work-areas/index.html, accessed 19/10/16

12 Morgan, M and Direito, I. (2015) Widening and sustaining postgraduate taught (PGT) STEM study in the UK: a collaborative project. Creating change through understanding expectations and attitudes towards PGT study, experiences and post-study outcomes from the perspective of applicants, students, universities and employers. Last accessed from http://www.postgradexperience.org/, 19/10/16

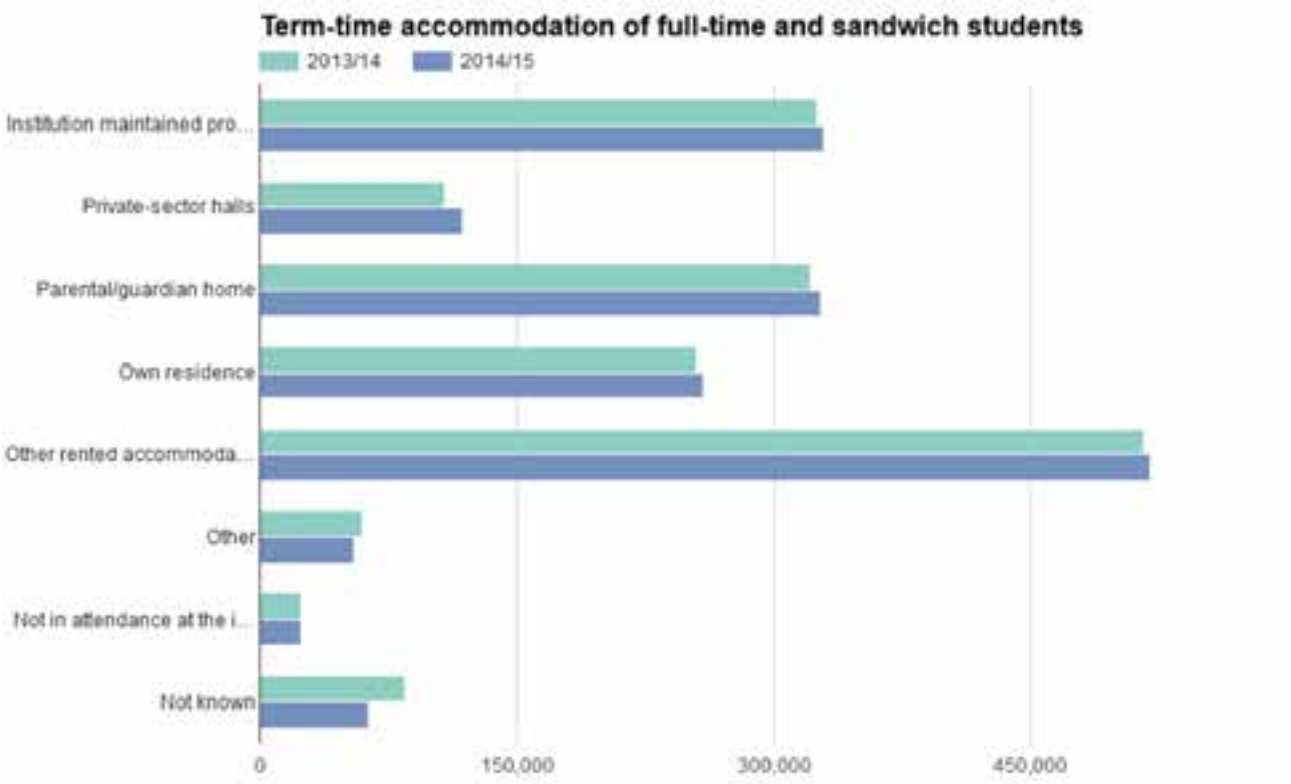
reported that 'having a long commute to attend the course' was a concern (p78), and it contributed to students' decisions to withdraw (p107).

The difficulty of gauging the size of the commuter student population (as defined above) is a further point we must acknowledge. HESA collects data about term time accommodation of students, which is presented below in figure 1. While student enrolments have decreased slightly between 2013/14 and 2014/15, this suggests a slight increase in both the number of students living in the parental home and in their own residence, but this is largely accounted for by the decrease in the number of 'unknowns'. Furthermore, as our research with institutions suggests, this is not regarded as an accurate way of identifing 'commuter students'. This data only relates to full-time students; 'parental home' excludes mature students, 'own residence' includes students who have bought a property near to their place of study; and the categories 'other rented', 'other' and 'unknown' may all include commuter students.

Figure 1: Term-time accommodation of full-time and sandwich students, 2013/14 and 2014/15 (from HESA)

Based on this information we can estimate that in excess of 500,000 students are likely to consider themselves 'commuters'. Woodfield (op. cit.) identifies nearly 500,000 full-time undergraduates living less than 30 miles between pre-HE home and HEP (the proxy for local). It will be instructive to see how the TTWA approach to measuring local students employed by the TEF compares to these sector-wide data, and other institutional measures or evidence about commuter students.

Using her definition, Woodfield identifies trends by discipline and student characteristics. Education, Health, Computer Science, Nursing, Social Work and Policy were more likely to recruit 'local' students, while more traditional subjects such as Economics, Geogrpahy, Environment and Earth Sciences, History, Maths and Statistics, Philosophy and Religious Studies, Physical Science, Politics and Veterinary Medicine had fewer local students. She also finds that black and minority ethnic (BME) students, mature students and students from lower socio-economic groups or with no parental HE qualifications were more likely to study locally.



Research design

3. Research design

Our study used a mixed methods research design which consisted of:

i. A review of institutional documentation, in particular Access Agreements, to pinpoint and assess the issues identified by HEPs in engaging commuter students, and the interventions and approaches currently being implemented.

ii. A sector-wide call for further examples of how commuter students are engaged across the dimensions identified above (academic, enhancement and social).

iii. Institutional case studies to explore issues and approaches, and the ways in which these are shaped by context.

iv. Interviews with students, undertaken by trained student-peer researchers within case study institutions.

v. A participatory workshop to explore interim findings and develop recommendations for practice.

3.1. Review of institutional documentation

We wanted to understand how institutions identified and addressed the issue of commuter students, with the intention of exploring the first three objectives (nature of the problem, types of interventions and approaches, and what works). We did this in part through a review of Access Agreements, using our initial and broad definition of a 'commuter student' presented above in section 1.2.2. But, recognising that institutions may not be using the term 'commuter students' to designate this group, we identified a list of key terms:

- Commut* (commuter, commuting)
- Local students (which mostly identified pre-entry activity targeted at local student but not necessarily opting to remain living at home
- Home-based (no hits)
- Non-residential (only identified summer school activity)
- At home (live at home, living at home)
- Responsibilities (caring or family responsibilities, with the inference that the student lives at home)

The search was performed by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA), using the qualitative tool, MAXQDA, to search the 2016-17 Access Agreements for references to commuter students using the above key words and terms.

This search identified examples from fourteen higher education providers (twelve higher education institutions and two further education colleges – see appendix 1). It must of course be noted that institutions may be undertaking other activities to support commuter students, but this is not included in their access agreements. For this reason we undertook a wider search.

3.2. A sector-wide call for examples

In addition to reviewing Access Agreements, we invited institutions and students' unions to send us examples of interventions and approaches they have adopted to engage with commuter students. As part of this process we invited respondents to address three key questions:

- What are the challenges higher education providers (HEPs) – including students' unions (SUs) - face in relation to the engagement of commuter students, and what evidence do you have about these issues?
- What initiatives are you developing and/or implementing to increase student engagement in the context of commuter students? What evidence do you have that these initiatives have been successful both in improving engagement and contributing to other outcomes for commuter students.
- What further guidance or resources would help you to improve the engagement of commuter students?

Although we received a huge amount of interest in the topic of commuter student engagement, we only received ten responses to this invitation to provide us with further information and examples of support. Five were from selective institutions (members of the Russell Group) and five were from inclusive institutions (post-1992 institutions). Details of specific interventions are provided by four institutions (one of which was not targeted at or adapted to enhance the engagement of commuter students), while three institutions provided research findings and the others commented on the challenges assocated with engaging commuter students, but offered no examples of how they are addressing the issues raised.

3.3. Institutional case studies

The main qualitative research was undertaken through nine institutional case studies, involving interviews with commuter students, discussions with staff about the issues and interventions in place to support commuter students, and workshops with students. We issued a call for 'research partners' through a range of email distribution lists, and within a short period of time we had received 168 expressions of interest from across the UK, Europe and Australia. We selected nine university research partners[13] listed below with the three letter acronymn used to identify them subsequently in this report. The numbers and percentages refer to the number and percentage of students living in the parental home for 2012/13 from HEIDI data, and thus given an indication only of the size of the commuter student population.

- Birmingham City University (BCU) 6,490, 29.39%
- Bishop Grosseteste University (BGU) 595, 24.59%
- City, University of London (CUL) - 3,850, 23.31%
- Kingston University London (KUL) 6,805, 28.25%
- Newman University, Birmingham (NUB) 1,170, 41.34%
- University of Bradford (UOB) - 3,980, 30.17%
- University of Manchester (UOM) - 3,250, 8.46%
- University of Salford (USA) - 6,335, 33.07%
- University of Sunderland (USU) - 4,005, 26.77%

These institutions were selected to include different types of HE providers in varying locations; we selected three city regions (London, Manchester and Birmingham) to enable comparisons to be made between the experiences of students studying in different HEPs in the same city. We chose institutions where at least 20% of students lived in the parental home (with the exception of the University of Manchester which was selected because it had taken specific steps to meet the needs of commuter students with a signficant number living in the parental home). We felt this would help to ensure staff are aware of the experiences of commuter students (see Malcolm 2014), and that it would be reasonable for these institutions to have made some adjustments to meet their needs. We recognise that living in the parental home represents only a section of the commuter student population as it is understood in this study, but this is the only data that is universally available. As part of this study institutions looked at their own data to gauge the number of students commuting and often found significantly higher numbers.

We visited each institution for one day. The format of the day varied, but included discussions with staff about definitions, data and specific interventions aimed at commuter students. We also held workshops with students to consider how their HEP could better meet their needs.

3.4. Interviews with students

An important part of this study is the experience of commuter students themselves. Building on our previous collaborative work with NUS/TSEP we recruited and trained eight student-peer researchers (SPRs hereon) - one at each of the case study institutions, and one shared between the participating Birmingham institutions.

Each of the SPRs self-identified as a commuter student, although this was not a requirement for the role. The students attended a one-day training event developing their understanding of the study, interview skills and research ethics, and they discussed their experiences of engagement in higher education. Collaboratively they developed an interview schedule, which was used throughout the interview process (see appendix 2). The interviews covered personal details, the commute, engagement, barriers to engagement and factors enhancing engagement. In total 60 interviews were completed with commuter students from across the 9 institutions. Students were paid a small flat rate of £9.00 for participating in the interviews. The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed, and analysed thematically.

3.5. Participatory workshop

Once the desk and fieldwork was completed, and preliminary analysis finished, we held a participatory workshop for HEPs and SUs to discuss emerging findings - with a focus on recommendations and guidance to support others in the sector to implement opportunities to increase the engagement of commuter students. Again, the topic of commuter student engagement proved to be popular and 50 people signed up to attend the partcipatory workshop. Discussions focused on:

13 We proposed to include further education colleges in the sample, but none volunteered to participate, so it was decided to work with the university sector.

- Concepts and definitions, data and measurement;
- Commuter student experiences;
- Institutional responses; and
- Implications and recommendations.

The views and experiences of workshop participants have been included in this report where appropriate.

3.6. Ethical process

An ethics information pack was developed, approved by TSEP and shared with the research partners. Two partners used this information to gain additional internal ethical approval, while this was not required in the other institutions. All participants, including students, staff and people attending the participatory workshop were given information about the study and there rights including voluntary participation, right to withdraw and confidentiality and anonymity. The information sheet and consent form is appendix 3. We have not used staff names or roles to avoid identification when reporting their views. All student names have been changed.

Analysis and findings

4. Analysis and findings

Throughout the research process all interviews and discussions were transcribed and examined for emerging themes. The implications of these themes were then analysed in relation to student and institutional contexts. Many of these ideas were subsequently tested at the participatory workshop.

4.1. Student engagement

Given its centrality in this research, our first task was to explore the meanings of the term 'student engagement'. As is discussed in Thomas[14], the term can lack clarity and none of our case-study institutions provided a codified or consistent definition. Consequently notions of student engagement often appeared quite context-specific – a point that is also recognised by TSEP[15]. These inconsistencies exist both between and within 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. (Staff discussion, BGU)

Yet, despite a lack of clarity and consistency there is a degree of consensus regarding the perceived importance of student engagement on the part of institutional representatives and relevant literature. For example, one discussion positioned student engagement as crucial for a meaningful student experience:

If you're not engaging well, then you're not going to have a transformational learning experience. You're going to have a superficial experience. If we are committed to this idea of formation, then that is committing us to try for a transformational experience rather than just them coming, doing some studies, doing the exam, and collecting a piece of paper from a grey haired bloke on a stage. (Staff discussion, NUB).

But we must also note that not all our student respondents regarded student engagement in a wholly positive light. A minority saw potential value in a lack of engagement – e.g. in a social context. This was because of the potential for disruption of study routines, etc.

I think I study at home more than I would if I was living in halls just due to distractions and not having all the resources I need, and space. Sofia

I've got my support system...so if I've had a bad day, rather than going home to student halls with a bunch of teenagers, I've got my boyfriend who can help. Katie

Student views such as this indicate two aspsects of the idea of engagement which are worth exploring: site and level of engagement. Commuter students are particularly focused on academic engagement, rather than other types of engagement, which they are not as involved in – though they do not regard this as overly problematic:

I attend all my lectures, I've not missed one yet. Don't really go to much social stuff, just hang out. Sometimes we just sit in here, chill with my friends for a bit, but that's it...I think, the social side, you get disadvantaged quite a bit. You don't form the same friendships that you would if you lived here, you don't engage as much, but I think at this stage, finance is quite important because you don't want to graduate with too much debt. It's one or the other, and I picked finance over engaging. Naasik

It's very rare that I don't attend lectures or seminars. I did the full placement without problems. I think it's very important you do attend all lectures and seminars to be able to engage in the course. Zara

14 Thomas, L. (forthcoming) Creating an evaluation framework for student engagement. London: TSEP/NUS

15 P6. The principles of student engagement. The student engagement conversation 2014. www.tsep.org.uk/resources

Staff in one institution noted that commuter students don't capitalise on social opportunities because such needs are met by pre-existing social and familial links:

The trouble with commuter students is, in many cases they're from the local area and have a support network, family, friends, so the question becomes, what will motivate those people to seek out a network within the university. I suppose, equally, the question has to be asked, why do we want them to do that as an institution, and why should they want or need to do that as individuals? Part of the answer is, university has to be about becoming a fully participating member of society. Particularly with the demographic profiles we have in the university, encouraging students to mix with people from a different background, with a different worldview, to become global citizens, is going to be of benefit to us as an institution and to them as individuals. The tricky bit is how we communicate the benefits of doing that, when they already have a support network and may feel they've got everything they need to get through the process and go on to a job. (Staff discussion, BCU)

Staff at various institutions discussed the challenge of engaging commuter students in voluntary extra-curricular activities. One told of an award scheme that helps students to quantify their extra-curricular activities such as volunteering and mentoring etc, and requires them to reflect on what they gained from the experience. Commuter students were less willing to participate:

It's a voluntary thing. However, it's the ones who are more involved who go for it. The ones that really would benefit from it just don't touch it with a bargepole. Commuter students aren't really doing it. (Staff discussion, USA)

Not only did students priortise academic engagement over other contexts, but they also tended to view it as synonymous with attendance. This in turn suggested they did not distinguish between different levels of engagement, and regarded it in more absolute terms (cf. Gordon et al 2016) than e.g. a graduated spectrum.

Staff by contrast viewed engagement in broader terms, recognising that mere attendance was not sufficient to qualify as a meanginful form of academic engagement:

On a fairly basic level, we're talking about attendance in classes, so scheduled timetabled events. Then it goes onto actively contributing in class or…other activities outside of that. It's showing a degree of self-motivation to actively engage. This becomes an issue for commuter students, where they may spend less time on campus than other students.

The number one issue we have with students is whether they attend, and if they do attend, do they engage? They can be quite passive and just expect to be given things. We're struggling more and more with the idea that students need to take responsibility… It is also about taking other opportunities beyond basic classes, like work experience and external courses. (Staff discussion, USA)

Gauguing levels of engagement was also important for the SU who distinguish between e.g. merely going to an event and, by contrast, leading a society.

It's about engagement in our activities…there's a spectrum… People who would just go to our bar or shop, down to people that run our societies. The further down we get, the deeper the engagement… (Staff discussion, BCU)

In the context of enhancement, attendance could satisfy definitions of engagement (e.g. going to a CV writing workshop) - but other types of enhancement activities might well require deeper engagement. Think here of how being a student representative should and usually does require more than 'turning up'. At any rate, the issue about contexts and levels of engagement is summarised well in this staff comment:

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. (Staff discussion)

So, whilst students cannot realistically be highly engaged in all contexts in everything, they can and perhaps should take responsibility for their experiences in – and progress through – higher education and beyond.

Summary

Across the sector and within institutions there is not a fixed definiton of student engagement, nor a consistent way of interpreting what constitutes it. We have differentiated between contexts (i.e. typres) of engagement (academic, enhancement and social) and levels of engagement (from attendance to active involvement). As might be expected, staff are in broad agreement with the literature that engagement is positive and that deeper engagement is preferable to more superficial forms. Conversely commuter students identified what they perceived to be the risks of some types of engagement and the advantages of being less engaged in - and distracted by - non academic activities. Furthermore we found commuter students to be more willing to engage in the academic sphere compared to the enhancement and social spheres. They often viewed wider engagement as 'nice to have' rather than an 'essential' element of a successful HE experience.

4.2. Defining 'commuter students'

At present, the term 'commuter students' seems to resonate across the higher education sector. Stated glibly it could be thought of as the 'latest buzz word.' Throughout this study we have received high levels of interest in the topic. As noted, we received 168 expressions of interest from potential research partners. The very idea of a 'commuter student' seems to be tapping into concerns that staff and unions have about certain groups' superficial levels of engagement.

In the majority of cases this study prompted institutions to define and examine their commuter student population, i.e. those participating in the study directly and those submitting written comments:

We have not yet undertaken any formal research into our commuter students, nor have we begun any co-ordinated action to address inequalities in our services. We have committed to take steps to find out more from our commuter students, and to plan how we can support them better and find more opportunities for them to engage with the Students' Union. Huddersfield Students Union

Institutions were often surprised to discover how many commuter students they had:

The issue is, we didn't know we had such a vast number of commuter students until [staff member] crunched the data, and I asked him to check it (laughter). (Staff discussion BCU)

Our study suggests that although the term 'commuter students' is popular, it has yet to find wide use – e.g. in relation to classifications used by HEPs and as a means of creating and analysing institutional and national data. It is relatively easy to compare home and term-time postcodes (discussed in section 3.3), but it was also recognised that the notion of the commuter student can involve a significant layer of complexity:

If you go away to university, it becomes your life. If you live at home and also go to university, you've got your life at home and you just happen go to there to have the lectures. (Staff discussion, USA)

That's probably one of the difficulties that commuter students have, in that because their lives are, 'I've got to drop the kids off, I've got a lecture, then I've got to get home, and then come back,' (Staff discussion, NUB)

One respondent to our sector-wide call noted that this grouping are sometimes referred to as 'Learn & Go students', and their increasing number affects the individual, cohort and campus.

This is now an identified issue amongst the academics here at my institution...(it) broadly identifies the significant majority of students who simply come on to site to access their course, rather than wider student experience opportunities, extra-/co-curricular, formal/ social opportunities. This in my opinion adds to the perception of consumer & supplier in Higher Education rather than joint partners. (Written comment, staff member, London South Bank University).

Two of our case-study institutions have developed their own definitions of commuter students. KUL's is simple but effective: such students are those who live outside of the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames. The university is located within this geographical area, and so are student halls of residence, thus students in university, private, parental and own homes within the borough are not commuters, those beyond are. So for instance a student who has relocated from the family home in Leicester, but who find themselves living a significant distance from their higher education provider, would be classified as a commuter.

UOM has a more nuanced definition. The preference there is for the term 'off-campus' students, and this group has been sub-divided into live at home (who are the young students), mature, carers and parents. This approach has enabled more targeted interventions at the issues and needs associated with each of these sub-groups.

The overall theme of this understanding is that they are students who live in their original place of residence/ with family; it is recognised that these students may have a different social university experience and different priorities to their living in halls peers. (Staff interview, UOM)

Throughout the discussions with staff and the interivews with commuter students we saw different aspects of the commuter student identity coming into play. Thus, while there is merit in understanding the size of the commuter student population, it may be essential to identify other associated characteristics and 'segment' the commuter student population to understand and adderss the issues further.

What you're talking about there is, what's the offer of the university? Whenever you start classifying people as 'students' or 'commuter students', you always generalise, and that's the one thing you can't do, because every student is individual...What we as a Students' Union should be trying to do is offering so many varieties of activities that people can identify what works for them at the time they're able to do it. That's very resource intensive, but also requires a more sophisticated approach to the ways in which we identify the students. (Staff discussion, BCU)

The Union at this university is looking to emulate others who are seeking to segment their student population more generally.

The union are looking at doing social engineering, where you ask students questions and put them in their tribes, their areas. That would be quite key to the institution...They've got different tribes, like 'party people', 'leading lights', 'conscientious carers'. That takes them out of the box of commuter students and you're not making sweeping statements. 'They're a commuter student, but they're actually a party person.' BCU

Dimensions of commuter students

Our findings from conducting interviews with commuter students (discussed below) would suggest that the term is a potentially useful way to differentiate cohorts – or at least to understand some of the challenges associated with engagement. But there are different dimensions that need to be understood, and which could be used to segment the commuter student population to help explore the issues faced by particular courses or institutions.

Much of the discussion with staff and commuter students was about the experience and consequences of commuting, but there are also issues about living arrangements, distance, cost, etc. The experience of being a student is likely to be qualitively different if you are: living with other students; living on your own; living with your parents or living with your own partner and/ or children. For example, City University drew 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. This can be contrasted with students at other HEPs who have to travel to study, but because they live with other students they do not classify themselves as commuters, even if the commuting experience (time, distance and mode of travel) is similar:

Thinking about my personal experience, I was a student at Manchester, and you would quite often have students who would live in Didsbury, which is about a half-hour bus ride to the university, which is about as long as some of our students are taking to get to Salford. However, they never consider themselves as commuters because they're living with other students. (Staff discussion, USA)

Indeed, and as was noted above, a study at the University of Glasgow defined commuter students as 'first year students who live outwith institution-maintained accommodation' (Browitt and Croll, 2015).

Contrasting student interviews and staff discussions in different geographical locations points to different commuter experiences in different locales. For example, commuter students in the urban areas in the North and Midlands generally had shorter commutes than those in London and rural areas, although the distances in urban areas were often similar. Expectations about commute time were different. For example students at Sunderland in particular talked about the challenges of relatively short commutes, which in other institutional contexts would have been perceived as more than acceptable and perhaps the norm even for those living in student accommodation.

Different locales were also associated with different challenges. Students at BGU were predominantly in rural locations and were often dependent on a single bus to collect them from their village and take them to the city centre. This was in sharp contrast to students in metropolitan areas such as London and Manchester, where the challenges were not about transport frequency. Indeed mode of transport contributed to the nature – and perception - of and students sense of the challenges involved. For example a mature student who cycled to the University of Manchester experienced relatively few challenges, while students who drove (e.g. Sunderland, Bradford and Newman in particular) discussed a range of issues associated with car parking, while students in London told of delays and overcrowding at peak times (these and associated issues are discussed in more detail below).

Discussions with staff identified a group of 'temporary commuter students', in particular students become commuters when they go on placement. Some institutions and disciplines have higher numbers of students on placements.

The placement experience results in isolation from the HE community and associated support, and can create a large number of commuting problems.

An issue that was discussed – although sometimes implicitly - was the frequency of the commute. Daily commutes may be seen as more demanding than commuting a couple of times a week, although the implications may be different: for those students who are only required to be on site infrequently the risks of non-engagement and isolation may be greater – although the challenges of commuting are reduced. BGUdrew attention to students studying on some of their PGT courses and flexible degrees which use a blended mode of delivery. Here the students come to the university site very infrequently, and thus do not have the daily grind of the commute but do experience challenges with wider engagement.

This can be contrasted with a large group of biomechanical engineering students we met at City University who undertake long commutes to and from the family home on a daily basis – but once in the institution are united with peers in similar positions.

A further aspect of defining commuter students is the overlap with other characteristics, in particular first generation entrants, low income and lower socio-economic status, black and minority ethnic (BME) and mature students. Recent research for the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)[16] found certain groups were more likely to study at home than others:

- Older students were more likely to live at home. Less than 20 per cent of those aged 18 years and under when they applied to university lived at home but around 80 per cent of respondents aged 26 years and over studied while living at home.
- Black, Asian and Other students were more likely to live at home in comparison to respondents in the White group
- Students with lower UCAS tariff scores were more likely to be living at home than those with higher tariff scores. Students with non-standard prior qualifications, including access courses and vocational qualifications were more likely to have applied as mature students and this group of students had a significantly higher likelihood of living at home than remaining respondents.
- Women were more likely than men to choose to live at home.
- Students whose parents worked in routine or semi-routine occupations were more likely to live at home as were those whose parents had not been to university.
- Students who attended a further or higher education institution prior to entry were more likely to live at home in comparison to remaining respondents.
- Students in Greater London, Merseyside and the North East were more likely to live at home than in other areas.

16 Artess, J., McCulloch, A. and Mok, P. (2014) Learning from Futuretrack: studying and living at home. BIS Research Paper 167. London: Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

- Students studying at a lower entry tariff institution were more likely to live at home compared with those at higher tariff institutions.
- Students who lived at home were more likely to choose Education, Subjects Allied to Medicine, Business and Administration, Mathematics and Computer Science and Social Studies than those who did not, and less likely to choose Languages, Medicine and Dentistry and Physical Sciences.

This largely confirmes earlier analysis by HEFCE[17], which in addition pointed to the likelihood of Bangladeshi and Pakistani students living at home, and also noted that:

- Students in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance have a lower rate of living at home (compared to all other students not receiving this allowance).
- Students whose pre-course domicile was in a ward with a high higher education participation rate are less likely to live at home.
- Students whose pre-course home was in close proximity to first degree provision (in an appropriate subject) have a higher rate of living at home in their first year of study.

Data analysis undertaken by our case study institutions broadly supports this national data, and data from one institution (BGU) found that postgraduate students were more likely to live at home and be commuter students than undergraduate students, which is likely to reflect national data.

Thus in thinking about the diversity of the commuter student population it is perhaps useful to identify some (largely) binary dimensions that go some way to shaping both the nature of commuter students' experiences and the interventions that would support them to be more engaged.

- **Age:** Young versus mature age students
- **Distance:** Local versus long distance commuters
- **Time:** Short versus long journeys
- **Context:** Rural versus urban commuters
- **Mode of transport:** Public transport, driving, cycling or walking
- **Residential status:** Living with parents, living with family, living alone or living with other students
- **Frequency:** Daily, some days per week, less frequent
- **Choice:** Personal choice versus a necessity.

Two key dimensions that contribute to engagement appear to be **choice** and **difficulty** of the commute. Some students were very clear that they had chosen to be commuters, and were happy with this choice (and were relatively defensive in relation to the idea that this might mean they were 'less engaged').

For example Hannah lived out for the first year, and has moved back to live with her parents. She says she had a choice and has chosen to stay at home because it 'works better':

I use my time more wisely. When I lived out, because my course is very independent study, I spent most of my time doing nothing instead of doing my work. Whereas now I have to do my work when I have the time to do it. So like I said, I take consideration in coming to uni and going home, and then the time that I have at home to do my own thing, and my uni work. Whereas when I lived out, I always considered myself as having too much time, so I never used to use that time wisely enough. So yes, that's the main issue, really. Isla

She is confident that commuting will not have any negative consequences for her attainment. Although she does not participate fully in extra activities such as the legal advice centre and or law trips, Hannah had anticipated this even before starting her course:

I was prepared that I wouldn't be able to go to all these society events and clubs in the evenings, so I knew that would be an issue. So I wouldn't be able to do my sports as much, because they are always in the evening.

Other students viewed it differently and many feel that commuting is difficult in and of itself. They appear not to have had a clear idea of quite how onerous the process would be:

I can see it is more negative than positive, because you know, as I said, my first year, I lived a lot closer. My second year, I've lived a lot further, and there is a negativity compared to my first year. I think a lot of that has gone with the distance. Sometimes when I finish, I'm like, 'Oh, God, I've got to walk home.' That kind of negative mind frame. I've got to walk all the way home, and sometimes when I do go home, I get very tired, so I don't want to start any uni work because I've just had to walk 45 minutes. David

17 HEFCE (2009) Patterns in higher education: living at home. Bristol: HEFCE

Our respondents' decisions to commute were influenced by a range of factors, including:

- Financial considerations. Students told us they had chosen to stay at home to save money, to reduce their level of debt or because they could not afford to relocate (yet some were still surprised at the cost of commuting).
- Family and cultural reasons. Sometimes students wanted to remain in the parental home as it offered comfort, support and belonging. Some were required to remain at home for cultural and/or religious reasons.
- Parental or caring responsibilities.
- Personal preferences. This includes choices to remain close to families and to continue caring responsponsiblities, but other choices may include wanting to stay in a specific geographical area, continue with existing employment or to retain existing relationships and social networks.
- Lack of alternatives. Conversely, lack of alternative my stem from financial considerations, family and cultural reasons and parental or other caring responsibilities, but other reasons offered include late decision to enter higher education and lack of availablity of (suitable) student accommodation.

The 'difficulty' of an individual's commute is largely subjective, and influenced by their expectations about what is 'reasonable' and 'acceptable', with students in different locations have differing views about this. However a number of factors may contribute to perceived difficulty, and may be worth considering in relation to your commuter student population.

- Mode of transport
- Distance from HEP
- Rural/urban
- Frequency of commute and nature of the course studied

I think if I lived closer, and also I think the people I'm engaged with at university, if they lived closer as well. If we lived within similar areas close to university, I think I would be engaged a lot more. David

Summary

The concept of commuter students resonates with people across the sector, but it is not widely used. Within this study institutions mostly chose to formally identify commuter students by comparing their home and term-time postcodes, although the limitations of this appraoch were acknowledged. Other terms in use include 'live at home' students and 'learn and go' students. Commuter students is a broad term, covering a heterogeneous group. Different approaches to segmentation have been used, and we suggest that it may be useful to think consider how much choice students exercise when deciding to commute, together with how much difficulty it may entail. How these two variables interact is likely to influence types and levels of engagement.

4.3. Data collection

Institutions and students' unions were keen to participate in our study, but usually discovered they held very little relevant and/or specific data - as this comment illustrates:

The difficulty is, I've asked around all of our different departments of the Union, and we don't actually have statistics that are easily accessible. One of the challenges we face is actually being able to record who is a commuting student or who isn't. You can guess by the postcodes, but it's very involved to go into that. (Staff discussion, USA)

The lack of common or shared definition of a commuter student permeates data collection and measurement and created an initial stumbling block for institutions wanting to develop their work in this field. Consequently they were forced to develop a way of interrogating institutional data. The most commonly used approach was to examine data submitted to the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and to identify students whose home postcode is the same as their term-time postcode.

It was quite interesting. When I came to see you and [colleague's name], we said, 'What is a commuter student?'...'What's our definition?' You came up with the solution...The definition we agreed on was simply those students whose home and term time addresses are the same. We thought that was sensible definition, and one we could easily analyse from the data we have. A lot of what we can do with institutional data is determined by what information we already collect... It was really just a case of, I guess, reformatting and summarising existing data setss to show us something that we hadn't really looked at previously. (Staff discussion, BCU)

This common sense solution was the approach that most institutions took, but there is a lack of confidence in this as a methodology, and a feeling that there must be a better way of assessing who is a commuter student. For example:

...we immediately spotted someone that he knew, whose parents bought them a flat, so that's not really living at home. There are going to be people who've fallen through the cracks. I think as a rough number it's probably OK. (Staff dsicussion UOM)

We don't have an answer to all of it yet... the Data Analyst... looked at the postcode information..., and he said we just don't have good quality data. He was finding term time addresses in Newcastle, so he couldn't put any confidence in the data that we were holding. I notice my own train is getting fuller with more commuter students, but they're not all going to Salford University, and I can't quantify that in any way. I don't think anyone can at that overall institutional level. I did see a figure several years ago saying that 70% of our students commuted. I have no idea where that figure came from because we don't have an accurate way of making that assertion. (Staff discussion, USA)

It may therefore be worth exploring how institutions could capture better data relating to the commuter status of their students. This could involve using an agreed definition of what a commuter student is, and a tick box, when students enrol. The definition used in this study could be the starting point for an institutional defintion:

Those who travel to their higher education provider (HEP) from their parental or family home, which they lived in prior to entering higher education - rather than having re-located to live in student accommodation (or close to the HEP) for the purposes of studying. This ;includes full-time and part-time, undergraduate and postgraduate, and in all disciplines and types of institution.

It is beyond the scope of this study to detemine a sector-wide defintion, as this would benefit from consultation and debate, drawing on the evidence presented here, and the experiences of institutions, unions and students. Nevertheless, we do feel the above definition (and the evidence presented in this report) provide a useful working definition to initiate debate.

In addition, or alternatively, providers may want to understand more about the different dimensions of their commuter student population, particularly the reasons and degree of choice and the difficulty of the commute. One approach is to ask students to declare themselves as commuter students and to provide additional information. This may work best if there is some incentive to do so. For example, the University of St. Andrews asks students to apply for 'commuter' status (see https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/studentexperience/about/what/commuter/) . Commuter students are are then entitled to some specific benefits such as: access to the Commuter Students Common Room, with a lounge area, amenities and kitchen; submitting assignments remotely via email rather than in hard copy at the University; to join the Townsend Society, which meets at the start of the year and hosts events throughout the year for students and their families; and information including the commuter student's handbook and a dedicated Facebook group. Institutions might usefully consider connecting the process of finding out more about their commuter students to the provision of services and support (discussed later in this report).

Some institutions have found it useful to map where their commuter students are located and present this information visually – with a view to informing their interventions. For example, one London university found that student's termtime postcodes showed them to be located throughout the UK (although this may also raise data quality issues, as noted above).

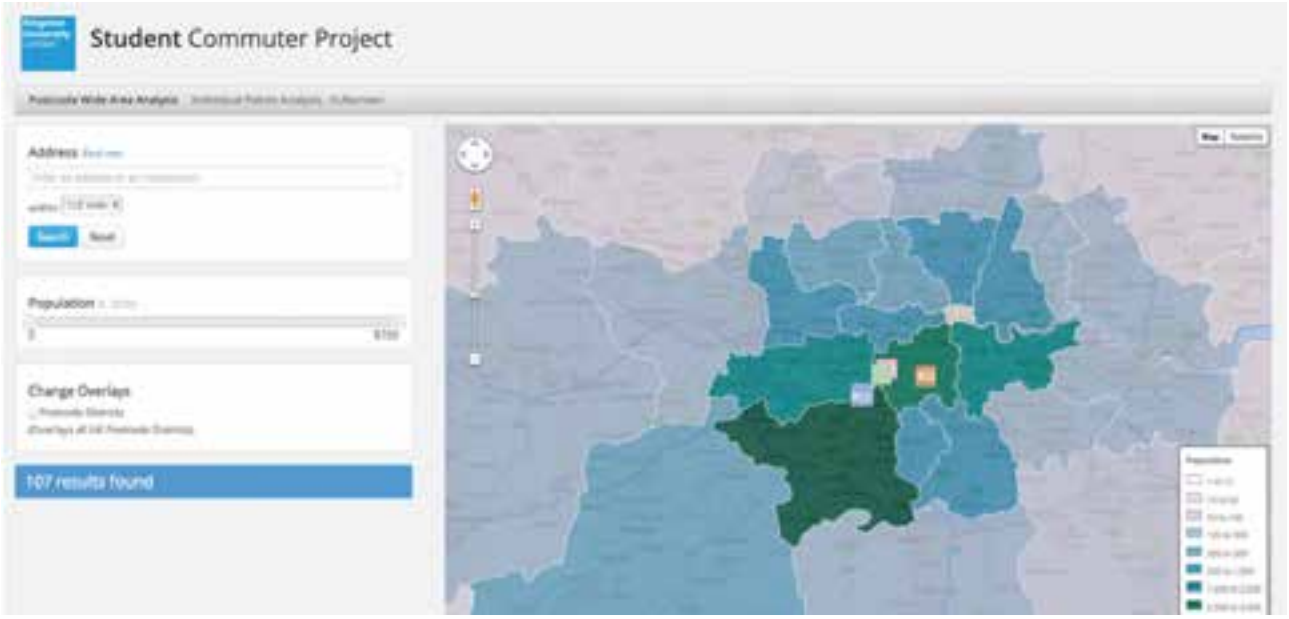
Figure 2: Termtime addresses of students at a London institution

KUL has undertaken signficant analysis of its commuter student population[18], this includes a map showing the density of the KUL student population in each of the postcode areas around the University[19]. Additonal functions have also been developed allowing staff to explore specific features of the commuter student population (e.g. first in family, ethnicity and disability) and to view more detailed information about the commuter students in specific postcode areas, including the number of students, the likely commute time, and student characteristics.

18 Helesen, E. (nd) The role of Student Services and Support in attaining commuter students. AMOSSHE accessed online http://www.amosshe.org.uk/amosshe-is-20-commuters 16/9/16

19 It is not explict in this report how commuter students were defined and identified in the data.

Figure 3: Location of Kingston University commuter students



Further data analysis would be useful both across the sector and within institutions to understand the intersectionality of 'being a commuter student' with other characteristics, such as (as illustrated in the Kingston infographics above and below), in particular: socio-economic status, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, entry qualifications and tariff points, subject studied, institution attended, (this list is informed by the analysis by Artess et al 2014 and HEFCE 2009, cited above).

Figure 4 : Additional infographics about Kingston University's commuter student population in one postcode area

Summary

Most institutions do not currently analyse their data by commuter status, and this is hindered by the lack of a clear definition. One symptom of this is the use of a proxy indicator, generated from the correlation of home and termtime postcodes. To therefore obtain more accurate and meaningful data, institutions could collect information by asking students about residential/ commuting arrangements at their point of course registration. It may also be useful to look at the relationship between commuter student status and other characteristics, such as socio-economic group, ethnicity, age, gender, disability, entry qualifications and tariff points and subject studied. Some institutions have found it useful to map the location of their commuter students to help support the ways in which they engage commuter students. But let us also enter a caveat here. In advocating these steps it is perhaps appropriate to sound a note of caution with respect to the use of the commuter student category. This is because it is potentially vague – i.e. too broad, and capable of obscuring important aspects of a student's background. It could lump students together rendering diversity all but invisible. Used in the wrong way and with insufficient sensitivity, it could hide more than it reveals. Data collection should therefore be considered in relation to the development of an appropriate definition(s), taking into account intersectionality with other student characteristics, and segmentation of the commuter student population.

4.4. Commuter students' views on commuting

The interviews and workshops explored students' views and experiences of commuting per se. Several common themes emerged e.g. that the task of commuting is difficult (or creates unanticipated difficulties). Only a few students pointed to positive aspects of the commute itself, and most simply became resigned to it.

I think it's like a hard thing, and I think if you're a commuter you just have to get used to it and try to make the best out of not a bad situation, but a bit of an unfortunate situation. Thea

People look at commuting as a really horrible thing and initially I did. I enjoy it. You get to meet people when you commute. It's not as bad as it sounds. At first it seems daunting, but it's not. I've addressed it. Nimrah

Only a very small minority of those we spoke to used commuting time to study – either because they reported being too tired, or due to the crowded nature of public transport, or – more rarely - because they drove their own vehicle.

Travelling is tiring, expensive and stressful

Students described the process of commuting as time consuming and tiring, although some had no idea how much actual time they would spend travelling over the course of a week.

(T)here are days when you don't feel like you want to be on a busy bus, packed in for about an hour trying to get to one place to only have to be there for an hour, then getting back on a busy bus. It takes a lot of energy out of you, energy which you could probably use for studying if you weren't commuting. Lily

Students also found commuting to be expensive – more so than they had imagined. Also, there is a strand of irony here. Some talked about commuting through financial necessity – yet they had not factored in the cost of travel.

As we all know too well, the task of commuting is often a stressful one – and this was noted by some of our respondents:

Basically, you can become very tired. It depends on your timetable as well. If you have a very long day, it's absolutely tiring at the end to run to the station and to get your train on time, otherwise, you'll be reaching home quite late... I think it's just that pressure of making sure you are keeping your time well managed, because from where I come from, there's only one train that goes every hour from Leeds to Rotherham. So, it's just that mental pressure. You're constantly stressed to make sure that you get to the station on time. Parvina

Parking

At some institutions the majority of students travelled by public transport, and at others signficant numbers drove. In institutions where the latter applies the perennial issue of parking was raised.

I think the criteria for car parking ought to be different...That's another thing you've got to think about, whether you'll get a space when you get there. Richard

Across the interviews and workshops the problems identified were:

- **Permits:** at some institutions students needed a permit to park, and they did not all qualify for a permit, which was frustrating and could cause resentment.
- **Availability of spaces:** many institutions have insufficient car parking spaces to meet demand, and students could find this difficult, adding to the stress of commuting and compounded by circumstances (e.g. tight timing due to doing the school run, or the need to come in the middle of the day due to caring responsibilities).
- **Costs:** some institutions ration car parking by charging, and this was often seen as a hidden and unfair cost.

All of these factors could force students to park further away from the institution, and sometimes to face security issues.

Concerns about security

Students raised a number of conerns about security, which were influenced by mode of transport and institutional location. In one group students discussed how they are are forced to park on the roads near to the university due to a permit system in the car park. They described a problem of local young men parking in their cars and verbally insulting female students, and even following them.

Students travelling by bus and train identified security concerns associated with going from the university or college to the bus or train station, and waiting there for their transport, especially later in the evenings.

Female student: After a certain time, I don't really like walking down the steep hill in the dark. Especially when you've got all the clubs and that, and you're going to have people stumbling.

Moderator: That's for safety?

Female student: Yes. Especially because the bus out here stops at six, so you do have to walk down at night. (Student discussion, BGU)

Male student: It gets dark quite early. If you're using connection buses you could be more vulnerable to criminals.

Female student: Bus stations aren't the safest places. (Student discussion, UOM)

Students at London institutions did not identify problems with getting to their public transport, but did voice anxieties about walking home from the tube station in particular. This could serve to discourage them from attending, and certainly from staying later (especially in the darker months of the year).

I don't like travelling on my own when it's late, so I always have to leave, like, a lot earlier than other people. I live quite far from the train station as well, so I have to walk through dark roads at night and it's really unsafe. (Female student, student discusion CUL)

Lack of a 'place' on campus

Once on campus (or at their place of study) students experienced practical and emotional issues connected to not having a physical space on or near by. If they arrived with belongings, including wet clothing, cycle helmets, books, lab coats and boots, musical instruments, sports kit, a change of clothes etc, etc. there is no where to leave them. Such belongings must be carried all day. This could be annoying, but it also marked these students out as different, and it discouraged some from doing extra curricular activities which required them to bring additional things with them.

Male student 1: I wanted to join the dance team, but I didn't, because they had auditions and stuff... Because it was just too much baggage. Carrying a new set of clothes and then being tired and having lectures the next day, and being sweaty as well on the train.

Female student 1: That's where the lockers and all that kind of stuff would be handy, because then you can change, at least, into your normal clothes.

...

Male student 2: Oh, I was going to say. When I have to do lab I have to carry my boots, my lab coat...and if I forget it, that's it, I've just lost whatever that lab was worth... I think they have lockers for pharmaceutical students, but not for engineering...we've said we need some sort of area, we'll pay for it, we don't mind.

...

Female student 2: Even when we go to the cafeteria, I remember there was this one guy in front of me in the line and he was wearing his lab coat and boots and they didn't serve him, because it could be dangerous. (Student discussion, KUL)

Some institutions (especially abroad) have addressed this problem through the provision of lockers, but the students we spoke to also wanted more than a place to store things – although this is important. Students wanted a physical space to spend time in. A space to meet other people, a kettle, fridge and microwave, and a space to get warm in after a cold commute. Students did not want to have to always go to the library to study or a café to spend money between taught sessions. In one institution the library staff identified problems with students using the group study areas as a place to hang out rather than study. Some students at one university described how they had congregated in a particular study area within one particular academic school, and how valuable this was, while others lamented that in their discipline there was no similar space. Perhaps more importantly a physical space is connected to students sense of belonging, and it is perhaps not surprising that commuter students do not always engage as much as other students as they are made to feel different.

Food on campus

Students talked about the practical problems of carrying and storing everything they needed for a day at university or college, and this included food. Some students brought food in, but they had to carry it around with them, which limited what they could eat. They talked about not wanting to always eat sandwiches, and the value of a place to store food and heat it up. Other students discussed the limitations of always having to purchase food on site: it is expensive and not very healthy.

Male student 1: It's not helped by the fact that the food here is so expensive, but they're also very unhealthy as well.

Everyone is nodding.

Female student: There's been some research done recently about what health support students want. A lot of students just wanted healthy food on campus.

Moderator: If you were not commuting, would it make it easier to eat healthily?

Female student: You could nip home for lunch, I guess.

Male student 1: Yes.

Male student 2: I feel there are cafés at university that supply good hot food, but it's the money aspect for me.

Lack of acknowledgement

Underpinning these practical frustrations, and others identified below in relation to specific forms of engagement, lies a deeper concern about the lack of acknowledgement or recognition by the institution of the lot of the commuter student. It is assumed in so many aspects of the HE experience that students are living nearby to the institution – and free of many of the other responsibilities that many commuter students have.

- Websites and prospectuses focus on accommodation options and the experience of living in a new location.
- Lectures and exams start at 9am with no allowance for travel problems.
- The timetable is dispersed throughout the day and the week compounding travel and time/space problems.
- Professional course placements do not consider where a student lives.
- Freshers' week activities are geared to young students, and often take place in the evenings and include alcohol.
- No social activities during the day – and no space to organise them in.
- Social activities are organised through halls of residences.
- Student union roles assume students have easy access to the HE site; one institution offers on-site accommodation to the union president.

4.5. Academic engagement

The students we spoke to generally saw themselves as good students – i.e. good academically. However, the self-selecting format of our "sample" may have, by its nature, drawn in the more highly motivated types. In any case, the students talked about attending the compulsory sessions and accommodating other academic requirements, such as group work activities determined by the academic programme.

It's very rare that I don't attend lectures or seminars. I did the full placement without problems. I think it's very important you do attend all lectures and seminars to be able to engage in the course. Zara

At some point in the interview or discussion, most respondents qualified their academic engagement to some extent:

I attend compulsory lessons. I miss stuff that isn't mandatory... I suppose, you know, like, when we have, like, kind of special talks or group workshops, I do have that kind of mentality, I can't be bothered to go all the way to uni just for an hour. (David)

While others were openly honest about the challenges:

You get lazy coming in sometimes, especially if you just come in for an hour a day. It's harder to come in. If you're with someone who likes working in the library, but the commute is so long, or it's so expensive, you're, like, 'I'm not going to come into the library.' You end up staying at home. You don't get work done. You sometimes don't make friends, or enough friends to make the stay enjoyable at Uni. You lose out on all the familyness people tell you about at Uni. I've seen at UCL but not here. It makes it hard sometimes. Aafia

Even these engaged commuter students explained the issues and challenges associated with academic engagement.

Trips to the institution need to be worthwhile.

With further to travel, many felt the need to factor in time, cost and effort. Assessing the value of attendance at social gatherings, one-off events and even taught sessions was common:

I base it all on how effective the teacher is. So if I feel like I don't benefit from their lessons then I'd rather self-study at home. Also if it's a noisy lesson and the teacher can't control the class then I might be better off studying at home. If the teacher controls the class well and can teach well then I decide to come in. Sofia

The value of coming onto site is also influenced by the number of academic activities in one day - so an isolated lecture is likely to have lower rates of attendance by commuter students.

Necessity to travel could be obviated without requiring serious organisational change. For instance, the requirement for students to come onto campus to submit assessed work has been eliminated at the University of St. Andrews, at least for those who commute.

Lack of recogniton or understanding from staff

Despite the passage of two decades since the emergence of the widening participation agenda, there is arguably still a danger that HEPs - and academic staff - often assume students are young, live on (or near to) campus, and have few other commitments or challenges to obstruct attendance. This assumption contains various strands including e.g. a preference for face-to-face communication (i.e. a reluctance to make relevant content available digitally, etc.), a failure to provide timely notification of cancelled sessions, preventing delayed students from entering taught sessions (lecture lock outs), and not allowing students to re-arrange their timetable to faciliate travel arrangements.

At one institutuion students felt there was a preference for face-to-face interactions, which was sometimes more difficult for the commuter.

Female student 1: They're like, 'Oh we can answer you over emil, but it would be so much nicer for you to come in.'

Female student 2: It is a big department, our deparment. When you email them, they don't get back to you, you have to actually go up to them. They'll be like, 'Sorry, we had a lot of things on our plate.' They'll speak to you then, but emails, like, it never works. (Student discussion, CUL).

Commuter students, mindful of the cost of a trip to the institution, were particularly frustrated when sessions were cancelled:

Female student 1: I'll come, but you turn up thinking it's going to be an hour, two hours, and then it's half an hour and the lecturer wants you to go off and think about something, and it's just, 'Well, I could have done that at home.'

Female student 2: Yes, we're on the same course. It's if you get here and you think it's going to be a two-hour lecture, and then the first thing they say is, 'We're not going to keep you long today.' BGU student discussion

Other students noted that they had often set out on their commute, or even arrived, before they found out that a session was cancelled, and again this caused frustration.

Male student: I had a 9:00am lecture and I had to get up really early for it. I got in and there was just a note on the door saying, 'Ill today. Sorry.' Efficiency with email could really help. You might have a lecture at 9:00am and a seminar at 3:00pm. I asked my course lecturer to be put in a different seminar group so I wouldn't have to wait as long. He said he couldn't do that. I feel as though it's a bit unfair, to be honest.

(Student discussion, UOM)

Students who were delayed due to their commute talked about the experiences of being made to feel embarrased entering lectures late, being made to wait to enter lectures or even being locked out of lectures.

Female student 1: Sometimes I've been in lectures where they say, 'You're past ten minutes late, you can't come in.'

Moderator: What subject?

Female student 1: Psychology as well.

Female student 2: For example, medical or computing students, if they're fifteen minutes late the doors are locked.

Moderator: Do they actually lock them?

Female student 2: They actually lock them.

Female student 3: Isn't that a fire hazard?

Male student: Or a human rights issue?

Moderator: How do you feel about that?

Female student 2: Yes, that's not right.

Female student 3: It never happens to me.

Female student 2: If you think about it we are paying and when you've commuted all the way, because of the delays and everything, then you get pushed away or turned out.

Female student 1: It depends on the reason, if you just didn't care, you were like, okay, I'll just sleep more, or if it was a delay and something happened.

Male student 2: Sometimes you just can't help it. I've been in trains where they're just not moving for like half an hour, it's so frustrating because you know you're going to be late. (Student discussion, KUL)

The rejoinder from staff on this issue is that late arrivals can interrupt the flow of a lecture, etc. and be disruptive for other students.

Penalties for late arrival to assessments

Unavoidable lateness can be particularly problematic for commuter students in relation to assessment – e.g. exams. We were told of penalties, including reduced time and being denied entry. This is compounded in modules and programmes that have lots of tests, for example in some science subjects that undertake a summative test every few weeks.

Female student 1: With us, we had compulsory assessed sessions which started at 9:00. If you turned up late by, like, ten minutes you'd ended up losing part of your mark. It was 10% of your mark every single time you turned up late. Often you can't avoid that because there was, like, late train, delays, a dog on the track. You end up losing so many marks..

Female student 2:Five to ten, fifteen minutes late. Which was really harsh as well, so a lot of us ended up losing marks. (Student discussion, CUL)

This perhaps suggests the need for some consideration of the timing of assessments, or special consideration for commuter students regarding regulations, or provisions to support commuter students with travel arrangements (including for example staying the night before, paying for additional childcare, or being able to use more expensive forms of transport if necessary).

Accommodating group work

In line with the arguments above, the students were largely willing and able to accommodate the requirements of group working, although they acknowledged that this could pose problems for those they have to work with:

It puts more stress on me because I have to take into account when I'm needed in uni for the group work, which then causes everyone in the group to have to work around a different schedule and is just a bit limiting. Lily

In institutions or courses with significant numbers of commuter students co-ordinating group working could be challenging, and it was suggested that groups could be facilitated by bringing commuters together based on location:

Female student: For the working with peers, it's the group work, especially if you are with other students that commute in, it's difficult to get everybody here. It would be better if everybody that commuted in a certain distance, not just fifteen minutes, for me it's an hour and above, that's what I would consider a commuter. If they all work together they could maybe find somewhere that they could all meet half way instead of coming to university. Some people have got children, they've got other commitments, so it would just make it easier if you were, like, a little club, if you know what I mean. It would be easier because you could decide, instead of working with people that live nearby. (Student discussion, BGU)

While there may not be an ideal solution, this does point to some of the challenges associated with managing and co-ordinating group work, and involving students in group formation might be valuable to address some of these issues.

Carrying everything you need for studying

We noted above the more general issue of having to carry things around all day, and this relates equally to books and equipment for studying. Needing to lug books about to use during breaks between lectures is off-putting, and students studying a range of disciplines commented on the issue of carrying materials and equipment. For example, art students experienced difficulties with large portfolio cases and items getting damaged either in transit or once on site; archaeology students found it difficult to store and move around expensive equipment; and engineering students had nowhere to leave lab coats and boots.

Poor internet access

It was noted by some students that internet access can be poor, particularly in rural areas. This can result in online engagement being difficult, but it was still recognised as very valuable.

Professional placements

Students on professional courses including health and education are required to spend a significant proportion of their time on professional placements, and must travel there, sometimes at unsocial hours. Students experienced difficulties when the placements did not take into account where they lived, for example requiring them to travel excessively, leave very early in the morning and arrive home late. This often left little time for additional academic work. Students were particularly aggreived when they had submitted their place of residence and transport options to the institution, or when the repeatedly had challenging placements to travel to, resulting in additonal cumulative stress.

4.6. Enhancement activities

By 'enhancement activities' we mean opportunities to develop personal and professional capabilities. Not surprisingly, our respondents reported lower rates of engagement in enhancement activities compared to academic engagement. In short, the bulk of their efforts were directed at the successful completion of their courses. However, a significant number participated in ambassadorial and/or mentor type roles and we note could be categorised as either academic or enhancement activity (research at the University of Lincoln[20] classifies it as the former). More importantly such roles may appeal to commuter students because they are more likely to take place during the day. We examine the reasons and barriers to engagement in enhancement activities in more detail below.

Events are often in the evening

The majority of enhancement events, such as networking opportunities and academic societies, tend to be organised for the evening. This makes it more difficult to attend because of the constraints of travel, domestic commitments, and having to hang around at the end of the academic day waiting for events to start. In addition, for some of these events it was noted a change of clothes was required (e.g. when meeting employers) and then students were faced with a choice: either carry around a spare set of clothes all day, or come to campus in business clothes.

20 Gordon, J., Strudwick, K., Brookfield, K., Jameson, J., McKane, C. and Pengelly, G. (2016) Exploring the 'dichotomy' within student engagement. Paper presented at the RAISE 'Excellence' in Student Engagement Conference, Loughborough University, 8-9 September 2016.

Representation activities often require students to be on site

Unions reported that representation roles often assume and/or require students to be on site, to attend training, to participate in meetings and to engage with other students.

I couldn't take any ranking positions purely because the commute would have affected if I needed to be there at a certain time. If there was a delay in the buses or strikes and I can't possibly get there on time, then it would affect the society itself, so I didn't take any ranking positions. Lily

It was noted however that there are a range of technological solutions that could help facilitate commuter student engagement, including on-line training, on-line participation in meetings and social media.

Lack of prioritisation of enhancement activities

We suggest that commuter students often do not appreciate the value of enhancement activities. They may not always understand how much of a premium prospective employers place on extra-curricular activity and how it can help applicants to appear "fully rounded," interesting and diligent, etc. Some thus mistakenly believe that academic success (e.g. an upper second) is not just necessary but sufficient to realise their graduate career ambitions.

Some of my friends came to uni for more of the social side, but to me, it was to do well and for more of a career, and to make sure I did well. So in that aspect, they don't have the benefit of being able to do more work, and not being disturbed, but I've missed out on going out and experiencing the stuff that's been done at the student's union, stuff like that. I've never participated in that. Olivia

Nor is a lack of awareness of opportunities to undertake enhancement activities necessarily the problem here. For instance, the same respondent proceeded to state that she knew she could do more in this context, but chose instead to focus on academic work:

I like the academic side rather than extracurricular activities... I think I am happy just doing the work, and stuff, but I think I know there are things you can do at uni, and it's not like I don't know about it. I'm just happy with what I do. Olivia

4.7. Social engagement

Our commuter students had significantly lower levels of social engagement than the student population more generally. Although some were content with this, the majority were not, and would have liked to have more friends and further opportunities for social activities.

Most students I know who live on campus have the ability to go out for a night out or go anywhere they want within the local area without having to account for a bus journey back home. That really limits your options. A lot of the buses stop around eleven o'clock...That's the biggest one that erks me the most. I would expand on that with socialising. If you were in a flat with students you don't know that's a chance to make friends right there and then. Charlie

The disadvantages of commuting - time, cost, effort, transport limitations, etc. – are the main barriers to greater social engagement.

In terms of transportation, it's expensive for a commuter student to be constantly coming to the university every time, compared to a group of people who could easily go to the same place together. If we said to meet up in a gathering place, where we can talk, be together and hang out, it's harder for commuting students to come. If there's no real purpose in the journey and you sacrifice socialising. It's more tiring to continuously go through journeys for frequent meet ups and group discussions. Maybe after class you can decide, if you stay on campus, to maybe have a shower and meet after two hours, but for commuter students it's hard, in that they have to first go back home, then the journey coming back. Jaban

Limited social network

The commtuer students we interviewed tended to only get to know other students on their courses, as they were not generally engaged with other activities and groups in the wider institution.

Mainly through my course. This year, we've had Commuter Connectors. Now, I'm able to meet more commuters. Usually just through my course. Lily

Opportunities for engagement via course are strongly influenced by course type (including number of contact hours), learning and teaching styles and how many other students are on the course. For example, at some institutions there were signficant numbers of local students studying courses requiring significant on-site attendance, and groups of commuter students attended workshops together. But at other institutions students were drawn from across disciplines and found it more difficult to meet other commuter students - and residential students often had their own social networks.

It was noted by students who wanted more of a (stereo)typical student expexerience that the lack of a personal network of friends could make it difficult to participate in more formally organised social activities (as they had no one with whom to attend events). This reinforced their comparative isolation and disengagement.

I've noticed that people who are in accommodation, they have first-years, second-years and third-years living with them, so they get to learn off each other about what university has to offer. (UOM, student discussion)

Timing, formal social activities and lack of space

In all of the workshops with students there was discussion about the fact that all of the clubs and societies meet in the evenings. They are constrained in their attendance as they don't like hanging about after the end of taught sessions, they have nowhere to go, they have no where to store a change of clothes etc. – and it can be difficult to get home at the end of the evening.

I'm co-president for the dance society, and we do a lot of events that allow us to run past the eleven o'clcok mark at City Bar, so I can't stay late, even though I'm organising it. Similar to what you were sayig, there's a road next to where I live that I have to walk down, by the station, and there are no street lights, and it's disgusting. So if I ever go to an event I have to leave at, like, 10:00, latest 11:00, even though my parents are like, 'What are you doing?' It's really hard to do that. (Student discussion, CUL)

There seemed to be a very significant gap regarding the organisation of daytime activities. At one institution this issue was subsequently discussed by staff members, including the registrar. While the student engagement staff were keen to look at suitable day time activities, the registrar was very clear that there was no space availabe during the day, as it is all needed for timetabled teaching sessions. The head of catering was keen to provide opportunities, but this would result in a cost (either directly or indirectly) and some potential catering venues included a bar, which others present thought might be inappropriate for some of the commuter students. What this exchange demonstrates is some of the genuine challenges institutions face or would face in providing space for commuter students.

The space issue was discussed further by students in this and other institutions. In particular they noted the lack of space on many campuses and institutional sites for informal congregation – a place to spend time with peers without having to spend money, to effectively develop a sense of belonging. Students talked about being moved on, which is clearly at odds with this. Again, in this context, the issue of bringing things to campus to facilate participation in sports and other recreational activities was noted, due to the lack of space to store equipment and clothing etc.

Lack of time and space – and priority for social engagement

Some students accorded low priority to socialising with HE friends.

Possibly yes, because it's a journey to get here, I have to be really motivated. I come here because I've got to have lessons, but anything outside of lessons, it does prohibit me.

I have once or twice, but again, it is a strain to get up here. It's not the most pleasant, positive experience walking up, 30-45 minutes to meet your friends. I'd rather meet them closer to home. David

It is interesting to note that some of our commuter students were quite reluctant to engage beyond the academic sphere, as they are concerned this may have an adverse effect on their academic achievements:

I have made friends from my course. I am cautious about how involved I get due to my commute. I don't want to be going in and out so I'd rather make friends with people that understand my commute, and friends that aren't a bad influence because I need to concentrate... I looked through societies in the brochures but none appealed to me. I didn't really want to commit to anything without knowing the work that uni would entail first. Sofia

I could've had plenty of friends, but I, kind of, kept myself to myself because I didn't want it to affect my education. Education is number one for me. So I just do my work, go home, and party a lot at home, with plenty of friends I could hang around with. So I try to keep myself not distracted in uni. Ella

Summary

Students told us that commuting is tiring, expense and stressful, and they had not fully appreciated this before they became commuter students. Some of the difficulties were related to mode of travel, for example parking issues, traffic jams and accidents and cancelled services. Other challenges were however concerned with the institutional context and culture, and could be things that higher education providers could address. Students identified security issues associated with walking, public transport and driving, and while not all of these are within the control of HEIs there are some steps that could and should be taken to improve the security of vulnerable students. Once on site students experienced a lack of 'place' to spend time, store things, and where they could 'belong', and they also felt restricted by the food available. More generally there was a sense of 'othering' as being a commuter student is not acknowledged within the institutional discourse; it is assumed that students are living near by, with other students, and engaging in a hectic social life. The institutional culture and discourse do not assume that students are making tiring journeys to study, with little time or inclination for wider engagement – and this is compounded by TV and media images of students relaxing and socialising, not struggling and studying. But many students feel that have no choice but to commute for a range of reasons.

The students in our study say they priortise academic engagement, but it was widely acknowledged that trip to the institution needs to be 'worth while', thus students are making value judgement about the efficacy of attending. They also generally managed to participate in group work, but they needed to fit this in with travel arrangements and other commitments. Students were critical of the attitudes towards teaching staff who reinforced and reflected in the institutional stance that commuting is not the norm, and is not to be accommodated through small adaptions. Students who are delayed travelling face humilation and worse and are particularly disadvantaged in relation to assessments that start first thing in the morning. Students again pointed to the specialist equipment and clothing required for some stubjects, which is difficult to carry around. Students in rural areas pointed to the limited internet speed, and thus that online is not a panacear. Students on professional programmes pointed to the additional challenges of professional placements which do not take into address their home location.

Students tended to undervalue and under-participate in enhancement and social activities. Enhancement and organised social activities are also captured by the institutional discourse of residential students, with events being organised almost exclusively in the evenings, and assuming physical presences on site. Informal socialisation was hindered by the lack of 'free' places – meaning both available and without indirect costs (e.g. for refreshments). Finally, we identified that commuter students prioritised academic engagement at the expense of enhancement and social engagement, seemingly unaware of the advantages of these types and sites of engagement to their implicitly and explicitly cited goals of achieving the qualification and secure an enhanced employment outcome.

4.8. Interventions to increase the engagement of commuter students

Bearing in mind the difficulties associated with commuting, and thus engagement in all aspects of the student experience, and the lack of value and priority associated with some forms of enhancement and social engagement by commuter students, we sought to uncover how higher education institions are seeking to support and improve the engagement of this group of students. However, as noted above, despite great interest in and growing awareness of the topic, higher education providers have done relatively little to address the needs of this particular group – even in institutions where large proportions of the students are commuters.

It's difficult to say what we've done for commuter students when commuter students are three-quarters of our students. It should be part of everything we do. The issue is, we didn't know we had such a vast number of commuter students until [name] crunched the data, and I asked him to check it (laughter). We knew a large proportion of our students were [from the region]... The challenge for us would be distinguishing what are specific initiatives that we develop for commuter students. (Staff discussion, BCU)

This may be because implicitly commuter students have shaped the institutional offer and experience. Indeed, one institution participating in our study (USU) engaged staff and students from across the institution in a process of 'uncovering' how they have implicitly responded to the needs of their significant commuter student population, and this generated several very useful examples (presented below in relation to engagement in the academic context).

In the majority of cases however it seemed to be because the experiences and needs of this student group has not been recognised. Rather

institutions have often continued to assume, or even strived to attract 'traditional' students and offer them a 'traditional student experience'. (And the latter has often been portrayed by the media in an unrealistic way which emphasises the social engagement and plays down the academic work involved). This perhaps points to the need to use the commuter student experience as a lens to both review and enhance the student experience and associated outcomes, especially in the context of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which provides a focus on 'local students' (based on Travel to Work Areas and in comparison to non-local students, as discussed above).

First, we consider what students told us would be useful, then we analyse what institutions and unions/guilds are providing and planning to offer. There is some what of a disjunct between what students want and what is being offered, but both lists may offer some inspiration to colleauges wishing to ease and facilitate commuter student engagement.

One of the main barriers to greater commuter student engagement is the commute itself. Therefore our interviews and discussions with students suggested quite a few ways in which commuting itself could be improved.

- **Share information about travelling.** Students thought it would be useful to have a way of sharing information between each other about logisitcal aspects of commuting, for example, the best routes (e.g. cheapest, fastest, most reliable, most direct, safest), parking locations, public transport tips and tricks, delays and accidents. Some of this information was exchanged through our workshops. Students suggested that Facebook or other social media would be a useful way to provide promote information sharing.
- **Developing a commuter student community.** Information sharing could be developed futher to promote engagement between commuter students. This could include identifying other students living and commuting from the same locale, which would offer the possibility of sharing travel and/or meeting up away from the institution (e.g. studying in a local library), or simply meeting commuter students to help generate a network of contacts and to promote information sharing. This could be faciliated by pre-entry or induction events, regular meetings and through online forum or social media.
- **Provision of lockers and a common room.** The provision of lockers was widely seen as a useful way to overcome the issue of having nowhere to store things on site, and having to carry everything around. Ideally students would like to see lockers in locations near to where they study, and co-located with a common room offering an informal space to spend time, store and heat up food, and socialise.
- **Bus service.** In some contexts a bus service was seen to be helpful, for example, between campuses, or to transport hubs. A connection between campuses would for example allow students to park at the campus nearest to them, and benefit from free or subsidised travel to their site of study. A link to the transport hub would remove some of the security issues in the evenings.
- **Security campaigns.** There was a feeling that there needs to be more awareness of securing issues, and campaigns for improvements. Mostly this was related to personal safety, although vehicle security was raised in one workshop.
- **Financial support:** subsidisied travel, bursaries and taxi fund . Students found the cost of travel expensive and identified ways in which financial support could be offered. In urban areas there was discussion of subsidised travel passes that had been withdrawn, which could be re-instated; they would like access to financial support for travel costs, and a taxi fund for late nights and similar would be valued. There was far less clarity about how financial support might be allocated and administered.
- **Parking.** Students who drove to study wanted better parking – which varied depending on institutional context. It included more parking spaces, more permits, free parking and longer opening hours of the car parks.

Students identified ways in which their academic engagement could be enhanced, including:

- **Commuter student-centered timetabling.** This would include later start times, especially for assessed or compulsory elements of programmes; and a blocked timetable, reducing the number of days they need to travel to the HE site, and gaps between lectures.

- **Lecture capture.** Students wanted effective ways of catching up if they missed lectures, for example through lecture capture, podcasts etc. Academic staff expressed concern that student attendance overall would decline, although the available evidence does not suppor this assertion. Students argued that they have paid for their taught sessions, and should have the opportunity and choice to access them in alternative formats (which has reasonance with removal of Disabled Student Allowance bands 1 and 2, and the proactive requirements of the Equality Act 2010.

It would be very useful if they posted a recording of the lectures just because the times where I've been stuck because of strikes and I've been hours late for uni. I feel like I've missed out on a lot because a lot is said during the lectures. It would definitely help if they put up recordings. Lily

- **Greater opportunity to study at home.** This included the provision of software and hardware, on-line resources, faster internet access, and the option of submitting assignments remotely.
- **Greater awareness and acknowedgement of commuters.** Throughout the group discussions there was a sense of a lack of awareness and acknowledgement of the experience of commuter students which permeates many aspects of the formal and informal academic experience. This might include more leniency with regard to arriving late for taught sessions and the opportunity for extended time in assessments if late arrival is due to severe travel disruptions that could not have been predicted. A specific issues identified in one institution was about professional placements, which assumed students were located near to the institution. Greater awareness of the location of commuter students was called for in the allocation of placements, particularly when students were dependent on public transport.

Students had fewer suggestions about how the institution could contribute to improving their engagement in enhancement activities, perhaps re-inforcing the comparative lack of importance attached to this form of engagement. The suggestions that arose include:

- **Day-time activities.** Students noted that certain activities (e.g. visits from employers) were schedueld in the evenings, which was often prohibitive for a range of reasons.
- **Enhancement activities timetabled into the gaps on the timetable.** Students thought they would be more likely to participate in enhancement activities which were timetabled into the gaps in their timetable, rather than requiring them to travel to the HE site on additional days or time.
- **Flexibility, including local opportunities.** In the two London institutions students thought the HEIs could either offer or promote enhancement opportunities in their local areas, rather than requiring them to travel to the HEI site. We also noted that student interviewees seemed to be more likely to undertake enhancement activities if there was some flexilbity, allowing students to choose when and how much to undertake. Thus, flexibiity regarding when and where enhancement activities take place may contribute to improving commuter student participation.
- **Build on academic engagement.** A signficant number of students interviewed as part of this study undertook ambassador and mentoring roles within their academic departments. This may be because they heard about these opportunities through their academic engagement, and had links with the relevant members of staff; and/or it may be that these were considered to be more closely aligned with their academic success goals. Whatever the reason, this does point to the need to promote and develop enhancement opportunities in the academic context.

Students and staff were well aware of the limited social engagement of commuter students, and students made suggestions of what would help them to spend more time with their HE peers.

During Welcome Week/Freshers engagement activity is very much targeted at 18 year old living in halls residents; this is a key time to establish what student life will be like for all who are new on campus. Those who live at home are not only alienated by the lack of inclusion targeted messages but also struggle to travel and attend these events; additionally the fact that these are often nights out alienates non-drinkers who often choose to live at home to be away from the student drinking culture. Flexibility around time-tabling in commuting means that students are often unavailable in the evenings throughout the year. For students with fewer contact hours they do not need to be on campus so this further supports the idea that they are not part of the community. For students with placement courses, e.g. nursing, they can alienate themselves completely from traditional student engagement through seeing their university life aligned with being in a work environment in hospitals rather than on a university campus. (Written response from UOM)

- **Commuter student space.** Suggestions included a common room and space for commuter students, including facilities such as a kettle and microwave and space to spend time.

You could socialise more there, and understand other people's commuter problems. It makes you feel like you're not alone in commuting, which is quite important. We also said about having a social media thing, getting to know other commuter students. Everyone else meets their flatmates and stuff online, and I guess you don't have aspect. (Student discussion, UOM)

- **Events during the day.** There was widespread call for daytime social events from the commuter students we spoke to in the workshops. However, it was not clear what those events would be like. In one institutional discussion students suggested quizzes.

With social activities, perhaps universities could have events that run throughout the day. We get emails about events starting at 7:00 or 8:00, it's a bit late to commute back for people who live very far. Sofia

Some of the other suggestions, such as lockers and informal spaces on site for commuter students to prepare food between the end of teaching and the beginning of social activities, and travel bursaries or opportunities to stay on site, may also assist students to stay later on site and participate in other social activities.

Interventions and approaches currently offered or planned by institutions

Only two of our case study institutions had specifically planned interventions or strategies to improve the engagement of commuter students (KUL and UOM). Thus, but rather through discussions of the issues and reflections on practice staff identified specific (and usually small-scale and local) ways in which they had adapted practice to facilate or enhance commuter student engagement. The search and review of Access Agreements (described above) identified examples from fourteen higher education providers of how they have recognised and sought to engage commuter students (twelve higher education institutions and two further education colleges – see appendix 1). Information in the Access Agreements ranges from simply noting that the circumstances of these students may make engagement more difficult, or providing information to help students make informed decisions to stay at home and study locally, to specific interventions. We also received a limited number of examples from our sector-wide call (described above). The University of Birmingham stands out as having developed a significant range of activities designed to let commuter students know that they are recognised, and to provide information and activities to facliate there engagement in academic, enhancement and social activities within the University and the Guild.

Drawing on the information from interviews and discussions with students, discussions with staff from institutions and unions, submissions from the wider sector, and our review of Access Agreements we have identified interventions that fall into ten broad categories:

i. **Pre-entry information and marketing to inform decision-making,** including but not limited to information about commuting, delivered on-line or in other formats. This is primarily intended to help students to make more informed decisions prior to entry about being a commuter student. A secondary benefit is signalling to students that the higher education provider recognises that some students choose to be commuters. Examples include:

   a. **Starting at NTU:** An on-line one-stop-shop providing pre-entry information, including content targeted at commuter students. (Nottingham Trent University, Appendix 1.)

   b. **Pre-arrival communications and website information.** (University of Birmingham, Appendix 3).

   c. **Marketing materials that explictly recognise that many potential students will be commuter students.** For example there are three videos, one of which focuses on a female student who lives at home. (There is however a balance to be struck to reassure residential students that they will not have a less good social experience as a consequence of the commuter student population). (CUL). Marketing information focused on staying at home and targeted at students who are considering very carefully the cost of higher education. (Wiltshire College, Appendix 1).

   d. **Local opportunities.** Providing opportunities for local students to progress to HE within local college context. (Strode College, Appendix 1).

ii. **Pre-entry and induction activities and opportunities to meet other (commuter) students.** Interventions and events organised by the institution, the academic programme and the Students' Union which assist commuter students to extend their social network and make the transition into studying in higher education.

a. **Pre-arrival 'Living at Home Residential'**, which provides an opportunity for commuter students to come to campus before the start of their courses to learn more about the University and the Students' Union, to take part in fun activities and sports, and to stay overnight in a hall of residence. (UOM, see also Appendix 3).

b. **Live at home students' lunch.** The lunch is organised in the week before welcome week for 'live at home students', they come in and meet each other, and then when they are start studying the following week they see a familiar face or two, in the way that people who have moved into halls do. (UOM)

c. **Pre-entry welcome visit.** Central staff organsied a vist to the campus for new widening particiaption students, which gives them a chance to become familiar with the site, and meet staff and other students. This would be useful for all commuter students, but there is not the budget to extend it. (CUL)

d. **Commuter-student network.** Regular meetings with lunch bringing together commuters, understanding more about the commuter-student experience and to make improvements. (KUL)

e. **Computer Science Welcome Activities** to engage new local undergraduate students at the start of the year and make clear that their context is recognised, but that they are expected to engage with all aspects of their course, and to help them to plan their involvement from the outset. A two hour workshop and lecture designed for local commuter students, which is promoted via a Facebook group during ths summer vacation, and a personally addressed letter to all students with a 'local' home address according to the postcode on their application. (University of Birmingham, Appendix 3).

f. **Welcome event for local/commuter students in the College of Arts and Law.** It offers the opportunity for commuter students to meet with their peers at the beginning of Welcome week in a way that on-campus students meet with other students in their Halls. It is interactive, and includes information and opportunities to discuss the advantages and challenges of being a commuter student, and contributions from current commuter students. (Univeristy of Birmingham, Appendix 3).

g. **Targeted welcome or orientation events for commuter students,** allowing them to meet other students and ease the transition. (University of Birmingham, University of Keele, University of Sheffield, Appendix 1).

h. **'Conversation Corner' for local students.** An opportunity for commuter students to join together and get to know others who are in the same situation as them, realise that they are not alone in that situation, enable them to make some friends and to start to build up a network of peers and peer support. (University of Birmingham, Appendix 3).

i. **Live at Home Student Network.** The aim is to create a community of students who live at home for mutual support and friendship, shared experiences and connections and to build up a community voice group to liaise with the University on any specific requirements, sharing of good practice at other HEIs and to support any policy development. Led by the Leeds University Union (LUU), officers and students set up the event within Welcome Week. The Network was promoted to students through a leaflet about Welcome Week that is posted to all first years in advance of them arriving at the University. This event was then repeated several times throughout the first terms to provide more opportunities for such students to be part of this network. (University of Leeds, Appendix 3).

j. **Student Buddy Scheme for local (commuting) and international students.** The aim is to bring local and international students together to create a voluntary "buddy scheme" where local and international students are paired up to share their different experiences and knowledge. The social event will be followed up in Week 6 of Autumn and Spring terms. The aim is to integrate commuter students into school activities by utilising their local knowledge, and expose commuter students to a wide range of international experiences right at the start of their time at university. (University of Birmingham, Appendix 3).

iii. **Creating an institutional identity and sense of belonging.** Strategies intended to help remote students feel part of the institution. Other interventions clearly achieve this aim, but thes are more explicitly about identity and belonging.

   a. **Creating a sense of institutional identity.** Students studying remotely or at a partner institution have less engagement, and so BGU had developed their identity – and hopefully engagement - with the institution through the provision of a number of number of branded items including pen drives and hooded tops, through visits to develop relationships and site visits. Students said they feel more engaged with the university than the college. (BGU).

   b. **Weekend schools to promote cohort identity and engagement.** Students studying at a distance from the institution can feel less engaged, and so some of the programmes organise weekend schools, where students and staff get to know each other and develop a cohort identity, which promotes further on-line engagement. (BGU)

iv. Targeted information, opportunities and support once in higher education.

   a. **Using the Access Agreement** to target and fund interventions for commuter students. 14 institutions mention student groups that can be broadly identified as 'commuter students' to 12 of these have interventions to support them. UOB noted that as a consequence of participating in this study they intend to build research and interventions for commuter students into future Access Agreements. (UOB).

   b. **Getting students to identify where they come from at the start of an academic course.** A couple of programmes at UOM have used maps to help indicate where students come from – from all over the world to specific parts of the city. The nursing programme at UOM asked people to put a label on the map to show where they came from, and then moved people into groups to enable them meet people from the same geographical areas. The PGCE at NUB asks people their postcodes and groups them together, and encourages them to study and travel together. (NUB, UOM)

   c. **Commuter Connecters.** These are students themselves who were asked to develop and pilot activities for commuter students to get involved in, mostly this was activities during the day to fill 'dead time' between lectures, for example lunches and networking events. The next phase of work is to appoint commuter connectors in the faculties who organised activities during the day with a stronger link to the academic programmes in each faculty, so for example speakers, skills and employability sessions. (KUL)

   d. **Locally-based volunteering.** Much of the volunteering is offered on site or close to the higher education provider, but there is a growing awareness of the potential of faciliating commuter students to volunteer where they live. The Schools Plus programme at KUL places student volunteers in schools throughout Greater London. CUL has an online volunteering brokerage service, which allows students to input their preferences including location and timetable information, and then to identify suitable opportunities. (KUL, CUL)

   e. **Targeted on-course support for students who live at home in London,** and those who enter through a widening participation programme. (London School of Economics and Political Science, Appendix 1).

   f. **Transition packs for low income students who choose to live at home** aimed at getting them involved in union activities from the outset of their university life. (Newcastle University, Appendix 1).

   g. **Outreach co-ordinator post in each (academic) department** will have a retenton/ pastoral remit. (Falmouth University, Appendix 1).

v. **Re-organising the academic curriculum, delivery and resources** to support the engagement of commuter students.

a. **Commuter student-friendly timetable.** Timetabling has been recognised as a barrier to commuter students and signficant effort has been put into ensuring that the timetable is arranged over a limited number of days (two or three) for each course in both Psychology and Sport and Exercise Science. This reduces the number of times per week students must commute to campus. Some courses have have introduced later start times to accommodate the needs of commuter students with other responsibilities such as dropping children at school, and they have grouped students using cohort knowledge, rather than randomly, recognising for example that when students share a car they all want to attend the same group (USU).

> I'd inherited a way of timetabling that was driven by room availability, which meant that teaching was just fitted into slots right across the week, regardless of who was teaching, what the module was. For staff and the students this was a real nuisance. You could have a single module with sessions right across the five days of the week. My task was to make a student friendly timetable, thinking about efficient use of student time. We tried to build in a pattern in which each stage could have its own day of timetable. It needed to be pedagogically sound. (Psychology, USU).

> There are several advantages to 'blocking' the timetable. Students are better able to combine studying with (relevant) experience; formal childcare requirements are reduced for students with children; lab technicians benefit as labs requiring the same equipment can be timetabled sequentially reducing the need to keep getting out and and putting away the same equipment; and it frees up space (e.g. labs) for dissertation and postgraduate students to use resources on other days – and thus helps with their planning and travel needs.

> We encourage them to work in jobs that are related to their degree, so that they can build a CV and make themselves more employable... Three days on site with us, two days working in a job 9-5 that's directly related to what they want to do when they graduate. (Sport and Exercise Science, USU).

> In addition at USU students are able to contact the central timetabling team and request amendments to their timetable to effectively create a 'personalised timetable', while this is valued by students, the value is questioned by staff, who note that students may compresss the timetable further, resulting in back-to-back sessions for two days, with not time for reflection.

b. **Using the curriculum to help students get to know each other.** The Law School has developed an induction activity where groups of students must visit key sites in the City where notably crimes took place and write a blog and take photos. The aim of this is to help all students get to know others on their course, and then when they come to more formal taught sessions they all know a group of peers. (CUL)

c. **Inspiring lectures.** It was recognsied 'centrally' at UOB that "one of the ways of engaging students is to make sure that our staff and academics are quite inspiring and build relationships with students". This is supported by the Centre for Educational Development, which runs a postgraduate certificate in higher education practice, and they are looking at other programmes to support staff to become more engaging. For example, some subject areas have developed team-based or problem-solving approaches. This is being supported by the development of the concept of and creation of roles in each faculty for 'curriculum fellows'. "We're all being encouraged to move away from just standing in front and talking for an hour". (Staff discussion, UOB)

d. **Attendance monitoring.** While attendance monitoring is increasingly widespread in UK higher education providers, UOB pointed out the value – and limitations – in relation to commuter students. Identifying low attendance provides an opportunity to talk to a student, and often this uncovers other relevant information

e. **Built in work placements.** NUB is committed to student 'formation' (which can perhaps be summarised as developing and floursh ing as a whole person), and they offer many opportunities, but note they are not fully taken up across the student population that includes a lot of commuters. They have therefore built work placements into most degree programmes as part of the capstone module. (NUB)

f. **Preferrential placement allocation.** The Medical School is changing its approach to the allocation of placements: commuter students will be able declare that intend to live at home, they will get preferential allocation of placements close to where they live. (UOM)

g. **More access to learning resources and specialist software.** The USU library is open 24 hours a day, to enable students to access learning resources and a learning space when they need it. In addition the library has invested in electronic books and journals to faciliate students working remotely, and to reduce the need to carry heavy books around with them. Search engines can be used by students wherever they are; they do not need to be on campus. To support students to make effective use of these resources virtual support has been developed, including printed materials, workshops, a module available to all students on the VLE and podcasts and videos to talk them through the process. The library at USA is also open 24/7; the library is also looking to host specialist software (especially around computer science), so that students can use it, without the university incurring a cost of opening a building out of hours, which may or may not get used. (USA, USU).

h. **Lecture-capture.** Students have frequently commented on the value of lecture capture, and institutions are at varying stages in the process of consideration and implementation. At CUL some courses have it routinely, others are rolling it out, and others have not yet agreed. Across all academic areas there is concern that making lectures available electronically will reduce attendance, although research demonstrates that students use the audiovisual resources in addtion to, rather than instead of, attendance. There is also a sense that as students are paying for their tuition they should have a say over how they access teaching and learning resources. Learning success has used lecture capture to record skill workshops, and have found students engaging with the workshops remotely. (CUL, UOM)

i. **Lenient policies on exams, extensions and re-sits.** By recognising the more complext lives led by many of their students NUB has comparatively permissive policies regarding assessment, which are seen to be influenced by and beneficial to commuter students. (NUB)

j. **Use commuter student experiences positively.** Not so much an intervention, but an idea that the commuter experience could be framed more positively, and be used to enrich the experience for the whole student population, both in and outside of the classroom:

Maybe we need to highlight the value of commuter students as well, because they bring other things with them. Without them, everything would be on campus, which would make a narrow experience. I find that commuter students bring in many experiences that make the classes much more interactive. They often have more to say because they're experiencing things externally far more than the students who are on campus. We could draw on that on a more positive way. (Staff discussion, USA)

vi. **Student partnerships.** Interventions and approaches making use of students' expertise and resource to promote engagement and belonging.

a. **Students as partners.** A number of the institutions involved in this study talked about initiatives involving students as partners, working with member of staff to implement projects, including research, curriculum design, or setting up extra curriculat activities. (BCU, BGU, NUB, USU). It was noted that these are attractive options to commuter students as they frequently take place during the day.

b. **Peer mentoring.** Many institutions run mentoring systems for students. City Buddies is run by CUL, linking existing students with new students, and many of whom are commuters, and this helps them get involves in the life of the university. USA is considering building peer mentoring in as a placement module to enable students to gain credits for undertaking a mentoring role. (CUL, USA). (See also peer mentoring targeted at local students. (University of Sheffield, Falmouth University, Appendix 1).

c. **Employ students on campus.** A number of institutions employ students on campus, and this is a valuable way for commuter students to spend time on campus – assuming the hours of work are either flexible or in some way fit around their timetable. (KUL, BCU)

vii. **Space for commuter students on site**

a. **Provision of social space for commuter students.** Some institutions and departments have provided a room for commuter students. (UOM, University of Winchester, Appendix 1).

b. **Providing a physical space for commuting students who want to get involved in Guild elections** to develop their election campaigns and store the resources necessary for this, to encourage their involvement in the Guild elections. (University of Birmingham, Appendix 3).

c. **Plugs!** Commuter students need to charge their phones, and when they run out of power they go home. There was a student union campaign for more plugs in the libraries and there are loads of plugs, and so these have become the social hubs for (commuter) students to hang out in. (CUL)

d. **Allowing use of vacant rooms.** University Senate agreed that students should have access to rooms that are not timetabled, and that they can 'colonise' vacant rooms because it is 'their university'. This message was publicised via screens etc. (NUB)

e. **Allowing students to bring children into lectures.** For students with children childcare is a challenge, especially during the holidays for school-aged children. At NUB the policy allows students to bring their children in to lectures as long as the lecturer is happy and the children are not discrputive. (NUB)

viii. **Financial and travel support** for commuter students.

a. **Free parking.** When the majority of students are commuters much of the everday life of the institution is shaped and informed by their needs. Free parking is provided by NUB as more than 90% of students commute, and many drive there.

b. **Free bus service.** As a result of consultation with commuter students the university's bus service routes was extended, taking students to a cheaper zone, and faciliating travel to all campuses. (KUL). USU also provides a university bus service, and it was mentioned that students would like the routes extended.

c. **Travel bursaries and funding.** A number of institutions have provided direct support with the costs of commuting. A travel bursary of £500 is available for USU commuter students during their first year, but students then miss it in subsequent years. At UCL funding is available for students from under-represented backgrounds to participate in activities when cost is a barrier. (University College London, Appendix 1). Targeted financial support for 'Cornish students living at home and not fully engaging in the university experience, completing 'bedroom degrees'' is provided by Falmouth University. (Appendix 1). Hardship bursaries of relatively small amounts targeted at specific groups including those living at home and struggling to meet travel costs are provided by University of Central Lancashire (Appendix 1). Bicycle vouchers, support for educational visits and exceptionally hardship loans for young people with practical and/or caring responsblities (and by implication living at home) are provided by the Arts University Bournemouth (Appendix 1).

d. **Low cost accommodation on campus.** KUL is exploring the possiblity of reserving some accommodation that can be booked by commuter students to reduce the stress of travelling, but they recognise that the price needs be kept low to make it an attractive and affordable option.

ix. **Inclusive strategies,** including the use of technology and social media.

a. **Use of online and social media to promote engagement.** Social media has been used to create communities when students are dispersed. For example the Nursing Twitter (USA) feed creates a connection between students who are commuting to their placements and often commuting for their academic study too. CUL sends out a weekly email with information about opportunities to engage in; a quick survey revealed high levels of engagement, but it is sometime hard to know how on-line information is being received. A student at USU explained how they use social media to meet virtually and support each other:

In my own set, because we have a lot of mature students in our set, what we've done is to create groups. We don't need to see each other physically. We have Facebook chat groups, where we all meet and we all become one, and ilf anybody's having any problems, that is where we solve it. If you're having any issue with any lecture or anybody, that's where we solve it. (Discussion group, USU)

b. **Daytime extra-curricular activities** that facilitate academic development and contribute to employability. Childhood studies (USU) developed extra curricular activities that were designed to fill timetable gaps, and which were relevant to the curriculum, based around the concepts of volunteerism and fundraising, and

providing an opportunity to put theory into practice. These opportunities were pushed by staff and taken up by students, including many commuter students (both mature and young). Participation improved students sense of identity and belonging with the course, has resulted in improved degree attainment and resulted in both skills for and offers of employment.

c. **Timetabling the Freshers' Fair.** Putting an hour into the induction week timetable for nursing students to attend the Student Union's Freshers' Fair has increased engagement. It is not compulsory, but because it is in the timetable it is widely undertaken; the students then meet other students from their course at a pizza party. (USA)

d. **Welcome Resources website for staff** to help plan their induction sessions with commuter students in mind (University of Birmingham, Appendix 3).

e. **On-line training, cohort discussions and meetings for student reps.** With a large commuter population, including students on placements, students unions have found it difficult to recruit representatives for some courses, especially professional courses, and student reps sometimes found it difficult to canvass the views of their wider cohort, and to attend the representation meetings. CUL have decided to record the meetings and make them available to programme reps to watch and engage with, they are also looking at taking student meetings out into different London zones. USA is looking having representatives in different geographical areas. At BGU the students' union is exploring using online strategies to increase engagement, and currently the process of discussing issues with peers can be done online – there is a structured format to review teaching, assessment, resources, careers and organistion, identifying both positives and negatives in advance of the council meeting. (BGU, CUL, USA)

f. **Inclusion officer within the Students' Union.** The Union Senate voted for an inclusion officer role, which is to train a specific person within society committees, whose role will be to identify and remove barriers to certain groups of students engaging, including commuter students. (UOM). UOB Union has created a non-sabbatical post whose remit is to engage local students.

g. See also lecture capture above.

x. **Research,** as reflected in this study, there is a feeling that we do not know enough about the experiences and 'needs' of commuter students, so a number of institutions have undertaken or plan to undertake research about 'commuter students' in more or less formal ways.

   a. **Collecting commuter student views: GOATing (Go Out and Talking) and a big commuter conversation.** GOATing sessions were organised on different campuses to explore commuter students experiences and issues, and students were then brought together for a big commuter conversation, where four key themes were identified: travel issues including cost; academic issues; social activities and events; and facilities and services. (KUL)

   b. **Student union engagement.** UCL and UCL Union will work together to look at student union engagement and whether there are barriers to participation amongst students from under-represented groups. (University College London, Appendix 1).

   c. 9Understanding why recruitment to PGCE ITT programmes is predominantly local, and identifying the importance of cost factors and care responsibilities. (Bath Spa University, Appendix 1).

Summary

Students were more likely to identify solutions to help them engage through the workshops rather than individual interviews, but much of the focus was on overcoming the challenges of commuting, and changing some aspects of provision of engagement opportunities.

Institutions have focused more on information provision and promoting networking, rather than structural or cultural changes. i.e. focus is on getting students to make more informed decisions and adapt to fit into, rather than changing attitudes and opportunities on site. There are however some examples, particularly from USU about ways in which the academic curriculum and resources have been re-organised and designed with commuter students in mind. Student partnerships have proved an effective way of engaging some commuter students, while extending this work through mentoring helps to engage a larger proportion of this group – if they take up the opportunities that are offered. There is some interest in offering off-site opporutnities (e.g. volunteering and social activities), but this is under-developed in the majority of institutions. There is still a great deal that could be done, and one would expect that institutions will become more 'commuter-friendly' over time, using this report as a starting point.

Conclusions, implications and recommendations

5. Conclusions, implications and recommendations

This final section of the report draws together what has been learnt, and considers the implications and recommendations for HEPs wishing to seek to enhance commuter student engagement.

The conclusion considers:

- Is commuting a barrier to engagement?
- What are the factors that inhibit engagement?

The implications section addresses the following questions:

- Are commuter students unable or unwilling to engage?
- Do commuter students have lower rates of success in higher education?
- To what extent does lower academic, enhancement and/or social engagement explain differential outcomes?

The recommendations seek to suggest:

- What can be done to improve commuter students understanding of and ability to engage?
- How can and should higher education providers be more inclusive of commuter students?

5.1. Conclusions about commuter student experiences

Staff and student unions more readily engaged with the concept of commuter students than the students themselves. This may be because commuter students have muliple identities. Being a student is likely to be one aspect of their personal identity, and commuting to study is just one dimension of their student identity. In the discussions with staff the potential limitations of the commuter student label become more apparent, as the term embraces all students who commute, encompassing different reasons for commuting, different levels of difficulty of the commuter, and different student characteristics such as age, socio-economic status, ethnicity etc which impact on identity and engagement in the HE experience.

There is however no doubt that commuting to study is not an easy option for the majority of commuter students, especially when the commute is expensive, tiring and unpredictable – and thus stressful. Some of the students seemed unaware of at least some of these elements of the commuters' life, in particular how long travelling to their HEP would take, and the associated costs. This does suggest that HEPs could do more to help (potential) students to collect the relevant information and make informed choices about their place of residence. There are some examples of institutions providing information to potential commuter students to help inform their decision-making, the risk however is that this marketing glosses over the challenges, rather than helps students to uncover them and be more aware of the reality of the experience they are signing up to. There are also examples from HEPs and suggestions from commuter students about practical ways in which their commute could be improved – or the frequency and stress reduced.

As we have acknowledged throughout, this study has probably involved the more engaged commuter students. But even for these students, the practical challenges associated with commuting often impact negatively on engagement in academic, enhancement and social activities. This does therefore suggest that commuter students could be a useful lens for exploring with a view to improving the student experience. We have raised a note of caution in this study about simply looking at the number of commuter (or local) students, as this is a broad categorisation, including a great deal of diversity and complexity. Thus the commter student category might best be employed in combination with other student characteristices, in order to better understand lower rates of engagement – and student outcomes (discussed below) – and how engagement might be improved.

While commuter students were not always well informed about the realities of commuting, there were also structural and cultural features within many higher education providers that negatively impact on the engagements of students who commute. Structural barriers include the timetable which is designed to maximise the use of the estate, but which is often not commuter-student friendly (early starts, late finishes, large gaps and teaching sessions spread over all or most of the week); policies and practices that either penalise commuter students (e.g. late arrival penalties, or the requirement to submit

assessment in hard copy) or that do not facilitate their engagement (e.g. lack of lecture capture and other supportive technology for blended and flexible learning and more widespread use of social media); lack of spaces on site for commuter students to store things, spend time and engage in social and enhancement activities during the day; expensive and often income-generating accommodation and catering on site; lack of on-site parking and links to public transport hubs; etc. Many of these structural barriers relate to the limited size of the institutional estate, but the priorities for using the limited estate reflect a culture that assumes and/or valorises traditional modes of residency and engagement – and thus reinforces the advantages of the already privileged. It may therefore be necessary to question whether HEPs can continue to expand student numbers without an equivalent increase in their estate to accommodate commuter student engagement. But the trend appears to be in the opposite direction, reducing the number of campuses and sites, and increasing the 'efficiency' with which institutional space is used.

Cultural barriers relate to the attitudes and ways of doing things that pervade and inform practices within HEPs. Thus, there is a sense in which commuter students are invisible. In each of our case study institutions large numbers and/or percentages of students commute, but they are not widely recognised and acknowledged, even in institutional marketing and communication pre- and post-entry. For example, every prospectus talks about student accommodation options and the social opportunities offered, but the majority do not talk about transport links and commuter student services, or the opportunities for flexible engagement in academic, enhancement and social activities. The culture also informs the 'dominant discourse' or assumptions that are held about where students live and how they should and will want to engage. For example, the unthinking expectation that students are able to attend networking events in the evening, or that they have somewhere to leave their lab coats and boots. There appears to still be a cultrual 'gold standard' which reflects the experience of the majority of academics and senior professional staff employed in higher education – and perhaps this needs 'disrupting', as these staff suggest, as a result of reflecting on the commuter student experience:

Do you think there's another way to approach it? We expect students to engage with us and be very involved with the university and for it to be at the top of their list, whereas the conversation we've just had suggests that we're not. Maybe there's something around looking at actually how we reach out to those students and how we recognise the lives they have outside of university. Perhaps we need to celebrate their successes and achievements. We maybe need to, and bring that into the university narrative better, rather than expecting them to come in and join with everything here, when they've actually got plenty of things that they're doing really well. Maybe it's about helping them to understand how that connects with their university experience. Maybe through that, they understand how their university experience contributes to their bigger lives. (Staff discussion, USA)

There may also be shortcomings in commuter students' appreciation of the value and purpose of participating in higher education, which HEPs and the sector might wish to reflect on and address. The students involved in this study, both as interviewees and participants in the workshops, largely viewed themselves as 'good students', who prioritised their studying with a view to gaining their academic qualification and progressing into employment. Indeed, while many of these students felt they have little choice about being commuters, some viewed commuting as a positive choice which allowed them to focus on their studies without distractions. But participation in academic activities is a value judgement about the utility and returns, and there are practical barriers which frequently inhibit participation in the full range of enhancement and formal and informal social activities. Thus, the interviews and discussions reveal a selective approach to engagement, based on their response to the question: is it worthwhile?

A few aspects of academic engagement, some types of enhancement activities and most social activities are seen as not particularly useful. Thus, lowe rates of engagement in these activities is not generally viewed negatively by the students themselves – or as a sacrifice (e.g. socialising with HE peers) they are willing to make. Amongst staff however there is a concern that many of these students do not see the value of participating in many of the engagement opportunities available within and through higher education institutions, as this extract from a staff discussion demonstrates – there are personal, academic and professional benefits from engaging in social and enhancement activities.

Staff member 1: I have a couple of mature students who are commuting here all the way from Liverpool, and I've said, 'It's a shame you're missing out on some of the other activities.' They've said, 'Well, I'm here to get the qualification. I'm not here to make friends.' It's a real shame to me. Perhaps they don't realise what they do get out of having a group of friends located where they are studying, because it's a part of their support network.

...

Staff member 2: We understand, I think, very well, that sometimes people are just going to come in for the sake of the qualification, because they have so much else going on. However, it is unfortunate that in their few short years at university, they don't build a network that they can continue with after they leave. Particularly in the business school, we do recommend that they are involved in things, so that they have network that they take with them, a life-long network, for business purposes. This is a really good environment for them to make those sorts of connections…. (Staff discussion, USA).

In another case study the focus was on some data about commuter student interest in placements, where commuter students are under-represented, compared to the rest of the student population (a finding prompted by participation in this study):

We looked at the number of students that expressed an interest in a voluntary placement. 2014 to 2015, we had 421 students. Out of those, 54% were commuter students, which is lower than 70% of the university…We looked at whether they were willing to relocate. Commuter students from Birmingham, 61% said they'd only stay in Birmingham, whereas other students, 87% were willing to relocate. That's a big difference. (Staff discussion, BCU).

There are obviously practical barriers and limitations on many commuter students paticipating in both placements and other activities on site. The concern however is whether or not commuter students are aware of the wider benefits of engagement which they are forfeiting. For example, Gordon et al[21] found that the 'non-engaged' students were unable to recognise and value the transferable skills developed through enhancement and social activities. For instance, they cite a non-engaged student who was involved in the rowing club, but was unable to see the point of rowing in relation to his/her future aspirations, and thus discontinued his engagement, while other students discussed the value of using social and sports organisations to develop networks that would be able to assist them in the future.

At this point, and from this study we can broadly conclude that many commuter students have lower rates of engagement across the board, but particularly in social activities, and to a lesser extent enhancement activities (especially those that do not take place during the day) and in some types of academic activity, especially informal collaboration with peers in connection to independent learning[22]. This raises important issues about why commuter students have lower rates of engagement, whether it matters, and if so what can be done about it. These issues are unpacked and discussed in the next section.

5.2. Implications of lower levels of engagement in some types of activities

Commuter students appear to have lower levels of engagement across all three types and sites of engagement, but in the main they prioritise academic engagement above and beyond enhancement and social engagement. This raises the following questions:

- Are commuter students unable or unwilling to engage?
- Do commuter students have lower rates of success in higher education?
- To what extent does lower academic, enhancement and/or social engagement explain differential outcomes?

5.2.1. Unwilling or unable to engage?

It is difficult to conclude why commuter students do or don't engage, and it is impossible to generalise across a diverse group. Our evidence however suggests that there are very practical barriers to engaging beyond the academic sphere caused by the travelling itself, and reinforced by the structure and culture of many higher education institutions, which assume a traditional model of student residency and engagement.

It is easy to forget or minimise the traumas of commuting, when we have greater financial resources and some autonomy over our working lives:

In terms of bussing, I'm equally guilty. I get up in the morning, choose which of my two cars I'll drive to work that day. Drive here for twenty minutes, park in my free parking space, get to work, 'It's freezing today,' walk 20m, go inside. That's a rather different journey for most of our students who are relying on two or three buses to get here. Some of the buses only run for an hour. I think as fairly well off middle class people with cars, we don't really understand… what the life of a student using public transport is. (Staff discussion, NUB)

21 Gordon, J., Strudwick, K., Brookfield, K., Jameson, J., McKane, C. and Pengelly, G. (2016) Exploring the 'dichotomy' within student engagement. Paper presented at the RAISE 'Excellence' in Student Engagement Conference, Loughborough University, 8-9 September 2016.

22 Informal peer support is an important element in assisting many students to develop as effective independent learners. See Thomas, L, Hockings, C., Ottaway, J. and Jones R. (2015) Independent learning: Student perceptions and experiences. York: Higher Education Academy

There are other practical issues that also impact on engagement such as family, caring and employment responsibilities. But there is also an element of not necessarily unwillingness, but perhaps lack of awareness of the benefits of engaging.

From my point of view, it comes back to what are you getting out of it? I've got a job, I'm getting money, that's going to support me for football with my friends, where if someone said, 'Come do fundraising, you're going to get nothing out of it but it looks good,' I'd rather take my job and get money. It comes to the same thing with university as well. If someone said to me, 'Would you do two hours of fundraising,' I would think straight away, could I not be using those two hours to do something else, going towards my degree. Two hours working for a charity doing some programming, it would get you work experience, but it depends if I have time to fit it in. I'd look at my other courses first. Say I had a programming module, and someone was like, 'Will you do this?' that work comes first. Once my work is done, I've got free time then, I'd put my time into that. My focus is on my degree, I wouldn't have signed up otherwise. All my time goes towards that. USU student

5.2.2. Less positive outcomes for commuter students?

A widely held, if often implicit, view is that commuter students – especially those exhibiting other non-traditional or disadvantaged characteristics – will experience less good outcomes from higher education, as is suggested by this comment:

The research is telling us that BME students and first generation students won't get the same jobs as posh folk. (Staff discussion, UOB)

In order to explore the significance of lower rates of engagement by (some) commuter students in academic, enhancement and/or social opportunities, we first need to consider whether commuter students have less good outcomes than non-commuter students. HEFCE (2013) identified four types of outcomes of HE: 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 (as opposed to any employment) or postgraduate study (graduate progression). So what evidence is available about the outcomes of commuter students?

The *What works? Student retention and success programme* (Thomas 2012) found that interaction with peers and staff contributed to students belonging, and retention and success in HE. The second phase of this work (WW-2, forthcoming) finds that travelling to study negatively influences engagement[23]. We do not however have data about the retention of commuter students however.

A survey of students' academic experience by the Higher Education Policy Institute and the Higher Education Academy[24] examined differences in the outcomes of students who lived at home and away from home in relation to development of skills, class of degree and employment outcomes. Students who lived away from home and those who lived at home showed similar patterns of change over time in their level of self-reported skills, but respondents who lived at home were less likely to have achieved a first or upper-second class degree. More narrowly focused research by Dante, Fabris and Palese (2013) found that living over 30 minutes from campus was directly correlated with medical student's likelihood of academic failure.

Analysis of employment outcomes (Artess et al 2014), found that in comparison to respondents who lived at home, those who lived away from home were more likely to be working in a job being undertaken only or mainly by graduates. The report comments:

While the decisions to enter HE by students who lived at home may have been directed towards improving career opportunities there was some indication that this had not been fulfilled. Respondents who lived at home were less likely to think that university had been an advantage in finding employment and were less likely to be optimistic about their long-term career prospects in comparison to those who lived away from home. (p45)

Futuretrack analysis examined whether the differences in the outcomes of students who lived at home and away from home were statistically significant. Among students who were aged 21 years and over when they entered HE the differences in outcomes (i.e. for employment, degree class and having a graduate job) between those who lived at home and away from home were not statistically significant. Among younger students the differences in the degree class and employment outcomes of those who lived away from home and at home during HE were statistically significant. In comparison to students who lived at home, those who lived away from home were significantly more likely to have

23 This is self-reported attitudes towards engagement, rather than comparative analysis of engagement behaviour.

24 Neves and Hillman 2016

achieved a first or upper-second class degree or to be working in a graduate job and were also significantly less likely to report that their job was not appropriate to their skills.

Thus, the evidence which is available about the outcomes of commuter students suggests that they do have lower outcomes than students who re-locate to study, and this difference is particularly pronounced for younger students,.

5.2.3. Does engagement explain lower outcomes?

In short we do not have conclusive evidence from this study that lower rates of engagement are causally related to lower outcomes for commuter students. There is however a significant body of institutional, national and international evidence pointing to the various benefits of student engagement (discussed to some extent in Thomas forthcoming). We do however need to develop our evidence base about the relation between student engagement and outcomes, and whether or not all forms of engagement are of equal importance and value. Staff in the interviews were concerned about imposing their views of a successful student onto contemporary (commuter) students, but equally there is a risk of not conveying to students and helping them to develop understanding of the potential benefits of engagement on their academic, employment and personal development and lifelong outcomes.

5.3. Recommendations

The recommendations seek to consider both:

- What can be done to improve commuter students understanding of and ability to engage? And
- How can and should higher education providers be more inclusive of commuter students?

In other words there is a need for (some) commuter students to have a greater appreciation of the value of different types of engagement, and to make more informed decisions about commuting and engaging. But there is also a need for institutions to look at structural and cultural issues that unintentionally disadvantage commuter students. The suggested recommendations are directed towards specific processes, and those actors who have responsibility for, or interest in them.

5.3.1. Student experience or student engagement staff within HEPs and SUs

R1: Challenge the institutional discourse and culture which assumes that all students are residential. Provide opportunities to recognise and validate commuter students and give them a voice in unions, institutions, faculties, departments and courses.

R2: Agree a definition of commuter students that is applicable for data collection and relevant to policy and practice within your institution, perhaps using the definition and evidence in this report as a starting point for discussion.

R3: Initiate work to find out about your commuter student population, and to recognise the expectations and experiences of different commuter groups.

R4: Use the 'commuter student lens' to examine student experience and outcomes and collaborate with commuter students as partners to look for effective solutions.

R5: Work towards both structural and cultural change, as well as helping students to better understand the implications of commuting and different types of engagement, both pre- and post-entry.

5.3.2. Data collection and analysis at national and institutional level.

R6: Undertake initial analysis of your commuter student population (e.g. based on the same home and term-time address). Consider how this population is distributed by subject, level and mode of study; the outcomes for commuter students; and the intersectionality of the commuter student population with socio-economic status, ethnicity, age, gender, disability and entry qualifications and tariff points in relation to distribution and outcomes.

R7: Disseminate the findings of your analysis within the institution and sector, to raise awareness of the issues and inform policies and interventions. This may involve presenting data visually, or in an interactive format to meet the needs of different groups.

5.3.3. TEF policy makers, panel, assessors and institutional submissions

R8: Be explicit about the importance of 'local students' as a contextual factor in relation to academic engagement and outcomes; this may involve segmenting the local student population to reflect the diversity uncovered in the commuter student population and to provide further insights into the impact of studying locally, which may vary by discipline.

5.3.4. Pre-entry engagement including marketing and recruitment

R9: Ensure the needs and experiences of commuter student are represented and addressed in all pre-entry activities. This should aim to change the way the HEP portrays the student experience, and inform the decisions that potential commuter students make. The former should include more examples and experience of commuter students, and the latter should include providing accurate information about the costs, benefits and risks of commuting, and the wider value of engagement in academic, enhancement and social activities.

5.3.5. Induction and transition

R10: Help commuter students to feel included, and to have opportunities to meet other (commuter) students and develop support networks. As far as possible this should be integrated into mainstream academic activities that are prioritised by commuter students. Social media and other technology may also help students located away from the the HEP to feel included.

5.3.6. Learning, teaching and assessment

R11: Identify and minimise the structural barriers to engagement, including timetables, submission of assessment, attendance and extenuating circumstances policies, placement practices, etc.

R12: Review and reduce the cultural assumptions about students' residency and engagement, including issues such as lecture capture, provision of co-curricular activities in the evening, use of on-line resources, the role of social media, access to staff and resources on site, etc.

R13: Provide greater transparency about the value of all types of engagement for academic, professional and personal outcomes, and help students to appreciate the relevance of different engagement opportunities to their longer term goals and aspirations.

5.3.7. Learning resources and academic support

R14: Use a commuter student lens to inform the provision of learning resources and academic support: make things available remotely, and provide flexibility on site, including the days and times on which services are provided.

5.3.8. Employability skills, extra-curriular and enhancement activities

R15: Analyse engagement in these services and activities by (sub-sets of) the commuter student population.

R16: Work with commuter students as partners to raise awareness of engagement opportunities and their value, and to provide engagement opportunities in more commuter student friendly ways (e.g. using technology, delivered where students live, developing new services tailored to their needs, encouraging, recognising and rewarding a wider range of enhancement opportunities, e.g. outside of the HEP).

5.3.9. Representation and union roles

R17: Review your processes and requirements using a commuter student lens to identify and address barriers to participation by students who commute to study. Think about timing, flexible (e.g. online) participation and the role of social media.

5.3.10. HEP facilities, accommodation and estate

R18: Consider how catering and space in the HEP accommodates the needs of commuter students. This includes opening times, access policies and spaces for commuter students to spend time, prepare food and leave possessions. It may also involve reviewing accommodation priorities, perhaps offering some on-site accommodation to commuter students on a flexible basis.

5.3.11. Social opportunities

R19: Look at introducing more commuter-student-friendly social opportunities, including things during the day, or immediately after teaching ends, or which can be accessed flexibly or remotely.

5.3.12. Financial and practical support for commuters

R20: Identify some of the biggest financial and practical obstacles for commuters at your HEP and work with commuter students and other stakeholders to look for practical solutions.

Appendices

Appendix 1:

Examples of institutional support for commuter students included in 2016-17 Access Agreements

Institution	Example of activity in 2016-17 access agreement
University of Keele	As part of the Keele Welcome programme there is a range of events open to all students, in addition to targeted events for specific student groups including mature students, student parents, local and commuter students as well as a number of alcohol free events. These events provide opportunities for students to meet other students and help them in their transition into University.
University of Sheffield	Orientation and transition support (getting established, sense of community) ▸ Orientation programme for students, with particular emphasis on local students, commuter students, mature students and students with a disability. ▸ Peer mentoring activity for a range of target groups including mature students, disabled students and local students.
Nottingham Trent University	'Starting at NTU' is an online one-stop-shop to support students through the pre-entry period, used most intensively between mid-August and arrival during Welcome Week. This work is conducted in close partnership with the Students' Union. It is a resource developed for all students, but contains targeted materials to help disadvantaged students make the transition into HE. It offers advice and information about starting university, including information on financial support, with targeted content for disabled students, mature students and students commuting from home. In 2014, 95% of all students reported that they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their initial university experience. However, student satisfaction varies by student background. Typically, young entrants and those in university residences indicate a higher level of satisfaction than mature students, those living in private accommodation and local students. The gap is being steadily reduced. Similarly, we have steadily improved the experience for those not living in NTU Halls of Residence; in 2005 the satisfaction gap between students living in NTU halls and living elsewhere was 20 percentage points, in 2014 this was reduced to 2%.
University of Winchester	Areas of accommodation are set aside for mature students. There is a room set aside for the use of commuting students, which provides a social space.

Institution	Example of activity in 2016-17 access agreement
London School of Economics and Political Science	We believe that there are UK students who are more at risk of feeling isolated and who feel less able to call on support mechanisms on campus than others. These students may take longer than others to adapt to new ways of learning, may experience difficulties in engaging with other students in their class or may require additional help with aspects of university life. These include students who have come through our own WP programmes and students who choose to live at home in London (often to save money or because they have caring responsibilities) rather than live in a Hall of Residence. Both of these groups will be targeted with specific on-course support.
Newcastle University	At the start of the 2015 academic year, we introduced a scheme to provide transition packs for low income students who choose to live at home and attend the University. This programme is funded by University alumni and is a positive step aimed at getting students engaged from the outset of their University life in NUSU activities, starting with Freshers' Week.
University College London	Engagement in student union activities is more likely to enhance a student's experience of university and helps students to build community and academic links. Some students can face additional barriers to participation not faced by others. For example, those with caring responsibilities may not have as much free time, and those who still live at home may already have an established life away from university. UCL and UCL Union (UCLU) will work together to look at student union engagement and whether there are barriers to participation amongst students from underrepresented groups. Research will be undertaken to discover whether particular groups are less likely to participate in UCLU activities. Funding will be available to enable students from underrepresented backgrounds to take part in activities where cost may be a barrier to participation.
Falmouth University	Retention among target groups is currently lower than the institutional average; anecdotally this is attributed to Cornish students living at home and not fully engaging in the university experience, completing 'bedroom degrees'. We will address this through targeted financial support and our mentor scheme. In addition the outreach coordinator post in each department will also have a retention/pastoral remit.
University of Birmingham	Three dedicated welcome events (targeted at mature students, student parents and students living at home in the local area) have been held by the Guild since 2014, not only to ensure students are fully aware of the services available to them, but also to foster peer-to-peer connections early in the study life-cycle.

Institution	Example of activity in 2016-17 access agreement
University of Central Lancashire	Our experience of administering the Harris Bursary Fund is that quite small amounts of support – provided in the form of, for example, food vouchers, book tokens and essential IT equipment – can make a substantial difference to students at different times of the year. We have used the Funds available to target support to mature students, those with family responsibilities, and students in hardship who are living at home but struggling to meet the costs of travel.
Wiltshire College	The College works with the neighbouring FE Colleges who also offer College Based Higher Education to raise awareness and aspiration of non-traditional HE participants. There is an annual marketing campaign which aims to appeal to those who are having to question very carefully the cost of higher education, so the focus is on staying at home, studying locally and possibly part time.
Arts University Bournemouth	Access to this support will be considered on a case-by-case basis, for young people who have often taken on practical and/or emotional caring responsibilities that would normally be expected of an adult. For 2016/17, support will be available in the form of bicycle vouchers, which have been very successful and facilitate student travel to the campus; support for educational visits; and exceptionally, hardship loans.
Bath Spa University	Recruitment to our PGCE ITT programmes is predominantly regional. In 2014/15 75% of entrants were domiciled in the south west of England, with 35% from Bath, Bristol and the surrounding areas. Our research with trainees has shown that this trend can be attributed to a number of factors including our local reputation as a provider of high-quality ITT, increasing numbers of trainees returning to the parental home for their PGCE year to reduce costs and debts and the number of our trainees with care responsibilities.
Strode College	As Somerset does not have a university and many of our students are mature students with responsibilities that often make travelling to study difficult, we have started to build opportunities for them to further progress their studies at the College.

Appendix 2:

Commuter student engagement: Student interview schedule

Overview of the study

This studying is exploring student engagement in the context of commuter students. 'Commuter students' travel to their higher education provider from their parental or family home, which they lived in prior to entering higher education, rather than having re-located to live in student accommodation or similar close to their higher education provider, for the purposes of studying.

Ethical information and consent

Your participation in the project is entirely voluntary, and you can withdraw up until 2 days after your interview has been completed, without any questions or consequences. The interviews will be digitally recorded and transcribed to inform the research analysis. You will not be named in any publications or dissemination associated with this study, or in any feedback to your higher education provider.

- You will be paid £9 for participating in the interview.
- Do you have any questions?
- Are you happy to continue?
- Ensure student has read and signed the information and consent form.
- Remind students to complete the claim form and email it to Tobin.

A: About you

1. What is your name?
2. Please tell me your course, year of study and institution?
3. Are you studying full-time or part-time?
4. Are you the first person in your family to study in higher education?
5. Were you under 21 when you started studying your undergraduate degree?
6. Who do you live with?

B: About your commute

7. Would you describe yourself as a commuter student?
8. How do you define a commuter student?
9. Assuming you commute to university, please tell me about the commute.

- How far is it?
- How long does it take?
- What mode of transport do you use?

10. How long have you been commuting for?
11. Why did you decide to commute to university?

- Are there any other reasons?

12. What other options did you think about?

- Did you have the choice of moving nearer to the university or into student accommodation?

13. What are the advantages of commuting?
14. What are the disadvantages of commuting?
15. How has being a commuter student effected your student experience (positively or negatively?

C: About your engagement

16. How often and when (days/times) do you go to the University?

17. What do you do when you are at Uni?

- What do you go for?
- What do you do in your spare time while you are there?
- How do you decide what to attend or participate in and what to miss?

18. How would you describe your engagement in formal academic activities (i.e. lectures, seminars, labs, group work, placements and other activities directly associated with your studies)?

- Do you usually attend all of your lectures and other timetabled activities?
- To what extent is this because you commute, or due to other reasons?
- What is your experience of participating in group work as a 'commuter student'?

19. To what extent do you engage in informal academic activities at your university: study groups, academic support, library, computers and other learning resources on campus?

- Is your engagement affected by being a commuter student?
- Do you feel you have less access to academic staff (e.g. tutors) and academic support than other students?

20. Have you undertaken any 'enhancement' activities which will develop your personal and professional skills and help you as you progress after you finish studying?

- Representation (course rep, student union, etc)
- Student ambassador
- Internment or placement or work experience
- Volunteering

21. How have you made friends at university?

- Through your course
- Through clubs, societies, sports etc
- Have you met other commuter students?
- Do you feel you have sufficient friends?

22. Are you a member of any student societies, clubs or sports groups?

- If so, how involved are you?

23. What other activities do you get involved in?

- Group work for you course
- Extra curricular things related to your course?
- Activities that will develop CV and contribute to securing a graduate job
- Uni sports or leisure / clubs or societies
- Meeting uni friends informally
- Other things?

24. If you had a choice would you be a commuter student?

- Please can you explain why or why not?

25. Do you think being a commuter student will have any impact on:

- Your retention
- Your attainment (e.g. degree classification)
- Your progression to employment or further study?

D: Barriers to engagement

26. To what extent do you feel that being a 'commuter student' limits your engagement in all or any aspects of higher education?

- Engagement in formal academic activities (lectures, seminar, labs, reading groups, personal or academic tutor session etc)
- Engagement in informal academic activities (e.g. group work, library, studying with peers)
- Engagement in formal enhancement activities (e.g. representation, internship or work experience, networking opportunities)
- Engagement in informal enhancement activities (e.g. leadership in a society, volunteering, developing a professional network etc)
- Engagement in formal social activities (e.g. clubs, societies, sports, mentoring etc)
- Engagement in informal social activities (e.g. making friends, socialising with uni friends, meeting up on and off campus)

27. What are the barriers to engagement?

- Can you tell me more about the barriers?
- How do they affect academic, enhancement or social engagement?

28. To what extent do you think that your engagement is affected by being a commuter student compared to other factors (e.g. being a mature student, having children, being a postgraduate student, having a job, etc)?

- What is the relative importance of these factors?

29. To what extent did you expect that being a commuter student would impact on your student experience when you started here?

- Did it affect how you made friends, or who you became friends with?
- Did affect how you made your transition into higher education?

E: Enhancing engagement

30. What would help you to get more engaged in different types of activities?

- Academic and course related
- Representation (e.g. course rep, student union role, etc)
- Enhancement – activities to enhance CV and help secure graduate job
- Social – both formal teams, clubs and societies and informally, e.g. making and meeting friends

31. What does your university to do to help improve the engagement and experience of commuter students?

- Can you tell me more about that?
- Do you have access to lectures remotely (e.g. video recordings, audio recordings, powerpoint presentations, handouts and notes). Is this/ would this be useful?
- Does your university have a policy or commitment to support commuter students?
- Do they make any special allowances for commuter students' circumstances? What happens if you are late for lectures, or exams?
- Do you think your university understands the needs or experiences of commuter students?

32. What could the university do to improve your opportunities for engagement and the student experience?

- Can you give me a specific example of how being a commuter students disadvantaged you?
- How did you 'university' respond to or handle this situation?
- How could the situation have been handled better?

33. What would you do to improve the engagement and experience of commuter students?

- Can you suggest any small changes that would make things easier for you?
- Can you suggest a major change that would improve commuter student engagement?

34. Do you have any other comments about your engagement in your higher education experience and how this is shaped by being a commuter student?

Thank you for participating.

Appendix 3:

Information sheet and consent form for research participants

Please read the following overview of the study and ethical guidelines. If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the consent form on the last page, and return it to the person who gave it to you. You should keep the overview and ethical guidelines.

Principal Investigator and contact details

Professor Liz Thomas
Liz Thomas Associates (LTA)
liz@lizthomasassociates.co.uk

Research overview

Liz Thomas Associates (LTA) has been commissioned by The Student Engagement Partnership (http://tsep.org.uk/) (led by the National Union of Students, NUS) to explore student engagement in the context of commuter students. The overall aim of this applied research project is 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). More specifically, the objectives are to:

i. Describe the nature of the challenge higher education providers (HEPs) face in relation to the engagement of commuter students.

ii. Document the kinds of initiatives that providers and students' unions (SUs) are developing to increase student engagement.

iii. Identify what works to improve the engagement (and wider outcomes) of commuter students.

iv. Develop guidance and resources for HEPs and SUs wanting to enhance the engagement of commuter students.

This study recognises that 'commuter students', who live away from the university or college and travel to attend, may experience challenges in relation to their engagement, especially beyond the classroom. It seeks to explore how these issues are experienced by students and institutions, and what can be done to improve engagement and student outcomes.

We are using a broad understanding of commuter students, including any undergraduate or postgraduate students who travel to their higher education provider (HEP) from their parental or family home (which they lived in prior to entering higher education) rather than having re-located to live in student accommodation (or close to the HEP) for the purposes of studying.

We are also using a broad understanding of engagement including:

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

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

iii. **Social:** Engagement in formal and informal sport, social and leisure activities with HE peers.

The key outputs of this study will be a practically-oriented report and examples or case studies of effective practice to support commuter student engagement.

Participation in the study: Research methods and ethical information

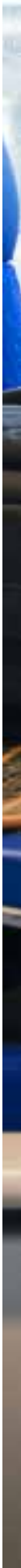
If you participate in the study it will be through a qualitative, semi-structured interview (either face-to-face or by telephone), or contributing to a participatory workshop. You must be 18 years or older to participate. This information will be used to inform the research outputs listed above, you will not be identified. If you participate in this study we commit to the following:

1. Your participation in the project is entirely voluntary.
2. You can withdraw at any time until 7 days after your interview has been completed without giving reasons and will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will you be questioned on why you have withdrawn. Your withdrawal will not be reported to any member of staff within your academic faculty/institution or place of employment.
3. Interviews, discussions and workshops will be digitally recorded and transcribed to inform the research analysis.
4. You will not be named in any publications or dissemination associated with this study, or in any informal feedback to your higher education provider.
5. If you have any preliminary questions or need further clarification please contact liz@lizthomasassociates.co.uk.
6. If you would like to make a complaint about the research please contact The Student Engagement Partnership, National Union of Students, team@tsep.org.uk

Name:. . . . . .

Signature: . . . . . .

Date: . . . . . .



Published, 2017 by:

TSEP The Student Engagement Partnership

Macadam House
275 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8QB

tsep.org.uk

team@tsep.org.uk

@TSEPartnership

/TSEPartnership