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## Not Fitting in, but not Wanting to: A Commuter Student Perspective

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## **NOT FITTING IN, BUT NOT WANTING TO: A COMMUTER STUDENT PERSPECTIVE**

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Expecting all students to want, or be able to have, the same higher education experience is derogatory. Widening participation needs to acknowledge this, and find new ways to engage the ever-changing student body within UK higher education institutions (HEIs). This student body is diversifying rapidly, with more students choosing not to leave home, and to retain part-time jobs during their studies. Experiential research has termed remaining at home rather than moving away an “inferior model of participation in higher education.” In this opinion piece, I evaluate this statement. It aims to underpin the reasons why students may feel this way. It also examines how HEIs can move forward to ensure that commuting, rather than being an inferior experience to living away from home, represents a unique way of working—one which is valuable because, not in spite, of its difference.

### **Defining Commuter Students**

The definition of a ‘commuter student’ is debated among widening participation practitioners. For ease, this piece will define a commuter student as a student with no difference between their home and term-time address. Using this definition, almost a third of students at Northumbria University are commuter students (32.64%). Despite the high prevalence of commuter students, few HEIs currently collect data specifically about commuter student success, meaning HEIs could be ignoring key contributing factors to lower attainment, reduced rates of continuation, and academic success.

### **Why HEIs Should Consider Commuter Students an Equity Group**

Despite this lack of identification of commuter status across HEIs, evidence suggests commuter students have poorer outcomes than residential students across a range of indicators. Commuter students have lower rates of academic belonging (Thomas, Hill, O’Mahony, & Yorke, 2017) and continuation (Chappell, Wainwright, McHugh, & Gilhooly, 2020). Commuter students without a study space in their homes also have lower engagement (Thomas, Hill, O’Mahony, & Yorke, 2017). Students living at home are less likely to achieve ‘good’ honors (2:1 or first-class degree), despite reporting the same level of skill development (Neves & Hillman, 2018). Further, a study of nursing students found that living over 30 minutes away from campus was correlated with greater academic failure (Dante, Fabris, & Palese, 2013). Commuter students are more likely to be dissatisfied with their course, and 9% of commuter students said if they could choose again, they would not enter higher education—higher than for any other equity group (Maguire & Morris, 2018). This pattern continues after graduation where former commuter students are less likely to be employed in graduate jobs (Artess, McCulloch, & Mok, 2014).

Commuter student status is further complicated by research showing that commuter students often face dual barriers: on the one hand due to their commute, and on the other from aspects such as parenting, caring, and being mature students (Holton & Finn, 2018). Commuter students are also more likely to be from lower social classes, state schools, and certain ethnic minorities (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018). Even after controlling for external factors such as class, location, and attainment, state school students are 2.6 times more likely to commute to HEIs than their privately educated counterparts. Moreover, British Pakistani and British Bangladeshi groups are over six times more likely than white students to live at home and study at local HEIs. Taken together, this suggests that “leaving home and attending a distant university is too often the preserve of white, middle class, privately educated people” (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018, p. 4). It is easy to see that although commuter students all have different struggles, many of them do not fit the old definition of a ‘traditional university student.’ Therefore, by targeting this group, HEIs are focusing on student groups which have potentially ‘slipped through the net’ of other equity group interventions.

### **Possible Explanations for Lower Outcomes of Commuter Students**

An often-cited possible explanation for lower outcomes in commuter student groups is lower levels of engagement in their higher education experience (Thomas, 2020a). This is supported by research linking student engagement with academic success (Thomas, 2010 & 2012). However, much of the research suggests commuter students are academically motivated and engaged, often weighing up the time and money associated with travelling to university against the gain of physically attending university. Qualitative studies suggest lower outcomes could stem from a lack of flexibility in the minds of staff—for example, staff favoring face-to-face contact and frowning upon students trying to rearrange timetabling to facilitate travel arrangements (Thomas, 2020b). In enhancement activities (which include any activity that takes place on campus outside of an educational course), commuter students have far lower engagement, both for practical travel reasons and because they tend to have a stronger focus on the academic side of higher education (Thomas & Jones, 2017). However, in HEIs which offered enhancement opportunities during the day, more commuter students participated. This suggests that student unions must be more accessible during the day, allowing commuter students their own feeling of belonging within university. Furthermore, Thomas (2020b) found that many commuter students did not value enhancement activities, with many “happy just doing the work,” suggesting the enhancement activities on offer at the university did not reflect their reasons for attending. Based on this profile of engaged commuters, perhaps more academically focused daytime enhancement activities could encourage greater participation of commuter students in wider university life, which in turn could promote a greater sense of belonging.

Jacoby (2015) utilizes Maslow’s (1982) hierarchy of needs to highlight a potential reason why many commuter students are unable to flourish in higher education: students attending to ‘lower-level needs’ (such as security and childcare) are unable to focus sufficiently on their ‘higher-level needs’ (such as learning or achieving educational goals).

A student who feels like a second-class citizen would most likely not seek out within the campus community the kinds of risk-taking experiences that lead to deep learning and personal growth (Jacoby, 2000, p. 9).

Lower-level needs are complex to combat. Many HEIs therefore offer hardship funding. However, it could be argued that attending to lower-level needs takes a mental as well as a financial toll on students. Students should therefore be offered the individual choice of how to receive financial aid—for example, free childcare may be of greater help to studying parents than money.

Disengagement with enhancement and social activities in HEIs means many commuter students do not develop links within the university. This in turn has fueled arguments that being a commuter student can ‘devalue’ the university experience (Holdsworth, 2006). Generally, in qualitative studies, students report experiencing an ‘othering,’ as being a commuter student is not acknowledged within institutional discourse (Thomas & Jones, 2017). This is compounded by media representations of students as having relaxed and social lives, and of never struggling, which is not representative of most students. Commuter students tend to describe themselves as ‘good students,’ wanting to fully engage, held back by issues associated with travelling and everyday mobilities (Holton & Finn, 2018). HEIs must aim to more accurately represent the higher education lifestyle, especially in their marketing material—for example, showing individuals studying while commuting on public transport.

### **Success for Commuter Students**

Despite this, recent findings suggest commuter students value the differences in their experiences (Maguire & Morris, 2018). Alternative routes into higher education involve self-sacrifice and often must be taken alongside paid employment or other responsibilities. Further, many students have to look after children or work alongside their studies. When we consider the extant barriers commuter students can face in HEIs, it becomes easier to view commuter students as a specific group. However, it also becomes clear why these students often find excessive challenges in their studies. Some likely struggle with the lack of a social sphere at university, while others are likely disenchanted by academic grading systems that are not reflective of the knowledge they have built. More targeted provision is therefore needed to help commuter students to achieve academic success, supported by enhancement activities which should be offered during the day. Yet it is critical that HEIs do not attempt to ‘shoehorn’ commuter students into the traditional student model, as most commuter students either do not want this or simply cannot fit it.

‘Success’ for students living on campus likely involves active social lives and enhancement activities. ‘Success’ for some commuter students simply involves achieving a good degree that allows them to progress onto further study or employment that is influential and enjoyable. HEIs must begin to be more empathetic towards students’ individual circumstances (as the pandemic has pushed us all to be), by encouraging collaborative timetabling and pursuing a more flexible learning approach. HEIs should take an individualistic approach to supporting commuter students by attempting to help them meet their lower-level needs and encouraging them to

explore the ways they can meet their higher-level needs (Jacoby, 2015; Maslow, 1982). In my opinion, HEIs can better support these students by monitoring the levels of commuting students as well as their attainment and continuation. While commuting students cannot always have the same experience as others, they can each have valuable, worthwhile experiences—provided HEIs properly consider their circumstances.

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