

Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education

Volume 1
Issue 40 *Fostering Inclusive Learning
Communities Together*

Article 23

July 2023

The Importance of Inclusivity for Higher Education Students: The Student Experience

Amy Kingston
Northumbria University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tithe>



Part of the [Higher Education and Teaching Commons](#)

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Recommended Citation

Kingston, Amy "The Importance of Inclusivity for Higher Education Students: The Student Experience," *Teaching and Learning Together in Higher Education*: Iss. 40 (2023), <https://repository.brynmawr.edu/tithe/vol1/iss40/23>

THE IMPORTANCE OF INCLUSIVITY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION STUDENTS: THE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Amy Kingston, Faculty of Social Sciences, Northumbria University, Class of 2021

The inclusion of students at university is widely studied and highly important. The significance of staff being educated in this field is vital, as this structures the overall inclusivity of the university (Beacham & Rouse, 2011). The aim of this piece is to highlight my experiences as a higher education student and communicate some potential obstacles that university students may face. I aim to establish what my long-term and short-term goals are, and explain some of the barriers I may come across during my studies, which would then highlight the importance of being successful in more generalized terms. This piece aims to reach a wider audience by suggesting why different types of support would be beneficial for students who have different backgrounds.

The Importance of Inclusivity for Higher Education Students

The inclusion of students at university is highly important. The definition of inclusion—according to Oxford Languages (2021)—is “the action or state of including or of being included within a group or structure.” Furthermore, success is an important factor to the university experience. My definition of success in terms of being a university student is achieving my goals so I can progress in my career. My short-term academic goals include achieving at least a 2:2 to progress on to my Masters and then advance on to a teacher training course, for which I also need at least a 2:2. My long-term academic goals consist of completing my teacher training course and achieving a fulfilling teaching career.

Within my time at university, the only barriers I have faced from an academic perspective have been during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this time, I have missed out on important emails and announcements, which had never happened before. Although I am aware that the staff were not to blame for the shift to online teaching, I believe that if the staff had sent out continuous emails to students, making it clear on a regular basis that they were available for support, I would have had a different university experience. In more general terms, I think that if staff were more helpful and supportive, it would be beneficial to all students, regardless of the pandemic.

In terms of my non-academic goals, my short-term goal includes making friends whilst at university, whereas my long-term goal is to continue my friendships, and to network so I can build associates to continue with my career. My long-term goal cannot be achieved without my short-term goal, so my short-term goal is crucial. To achieve my non-academic goals, I understand that a positive university experience is essential. Therefore, all possible barriers to achieving this need to be addressed. I am fortunate enough to have met some of the most amazing people at university, and I truly believe that I have made some life-long friends. However, some students are not as fortunate, as they struggle to socialize or bond with people (Langston & Cantor, 1989). Therefore, tasks or activities designed to ‘break the ice’ when students first start university (in the induction, for example) are necessary, so that students who

want to make friends have the ability and confidence to do so. University life establishes students' experiences and helps shape their future. Therefore, it is incredibly important that students feel included and make friends, as a positive university experience will help students develop (Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011).

Although my time at university has been positive, there have been some barriers I have faced during my studies. One barrier is that I am a commuter student, which meant I found it hard to be fully involved in all aspects of university life. Anderson, Avery, & Southall (2016) define the term 'commuter student' as a student whose home postcode is the same as their term-time postcode. Throughout my time at university, I lived at my parents' home and travelled around 20 minutes to my university to study. Kuh, Gonyea, & Palmer (2001) suggest that a possible explanation of why commuter students are less involved in university life is that most students who live at home are usually occupied with more family commitments. They are therefore less engaged with socializing and being involved in events at university. It is also possible that commuter students simply do not have the time for family commitments, a part-time job, their studies, or involvement in student life.

During my time of being a student inclusion consultant, I looked at the commuter student experience. I interviewed commuter students, and although some students enjoyed their experiences and generally didn't find it hard to make friends, some commuter students suggested that their university experience would have been different if they had lived on campus. Some commuter students suggested that they persevered through commuting life: they agreed to meet up with friends before lectures and during social events, they arranged a separate taxi home, and so on. However, this was not always the case for some students. Many commuter students interviewed implied that they struggled to make friends, and that being a commuter student meant they had to make even more of an effort to be involved. Fernandes, Ford, Rayner, & Pretorius (2017) suggest a way to combat this. They suggest that an extra-curricular activity specifically for commuter students would be beneficial for them, as it would help them to both make friends with people of similar circumstances and be involved in an event where they can make connections with staff members.

During my time as a student inclusion consultant, I also assessed how positive or negative the experience of having a personal tutor is for university students. The feedback I received from this was mixed: the number of students who suggested that they enjoyed being a commuter student and had a positive personal tutor experience was very limited. However, students did have positive things to say—for example, that their personal tutor organized weekly catch-up meetings and was very helpful, especially with dissertation support. The personal tutoring system has been described as 'pivotal' (Yale, 2017). The support from a personal tutor will help students adjust to university life, while a good personal tutor will also support different backgrounds of students. A considerable number of the students interviewed stated that they initiated all conversations with their personal tutor, and that their personal tutor mostly sent emails with generic messages, rather than messages tailored specifically to the student. This therefore led to limited conversations between students and personal tutors. Some students suggested that their personal tutor was never formally introduced to them, or that they had never spoken to their personal tutor. Few students interviewed stated that they had received a lot of advice and guidance from their personal tutors, or that personal tutors were very helpful during their

dissertation process. Personal tutors are important because their support can not only help increase students' confidence, but can also help create a good relationship between staff and student, and make university life overall more positive. This will then inevitably help the students reach their targets and could help them feel more included in university life.

My own experience with the personal tutoring system has been diverse. I was aware of who my personal tutor was and I would receive support from them if I initiated it. However, for my course, my personal tutor was changed to a new member of staff who I did not know, and I therefore felt less confident expressing my concerns. Due to this, I do think that it is necessary for personal tutors to remain consistent throughout the course if possible. According to Walker (2020), usually a student's personal tutor helps with academic progress as well as personal development as they guide the student on every aspect of their studies by discussing how the student can improve. Listening to the feedback from students about the personal tutoring system, it is clear that personal tutors need to be more involved with students. This could increase students' confidence and overall help with their academic and personal growth at university.

References

- Anderson, D., Avery, B., & Southall, J. (2016). Addressing problems faced by 'commuter' students in higher education. Kingston University Research Repository. <http://eprints.kingston.ac.uk/id/eprint/35873/>
- Beacham, N., & Rouse, M. (2011). Student teachers' attitudes and beliefs about inclusion and inclusive practice. *Journal of Research in Special Educational Needs* 12(1): 3–11.
- Fernandes, A., Ford, A., Rayner, G., & Pretorius, L. (2017). Building a sense of belonging among tertiary commuter students: The Monash Non-Residential Colleges program. *Student Success* 8(2): 31–42.
- Kuh, G., Gonyea, R., & Palmer, M. (2001). The Disengaged Commuter Student: Fact or Fiction? *Commuter Perspectives* 27.
- Langston, C., & Cantor, N. (1989). Social anxiety and social constraint: When making friends is hard. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 56(4): 649–661.
- Languages.oup.com. (2021). Oxford Languages and Google – English. <https://languages.oup.com/google-dictionary-en/>
- Oades, L., Robinson, P., Green, S., & Spence, G. (2011). Towards a positive university. *The Journal of Positive Psychology* 6(6): 432-439.
- Walker, B. (2020). Tackling the personal tutoring conundrum: A qualitative study on the impact of developmental support for tutors. *Active Learning in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787420926007>

Yale, A. (2017). The personal tutor–student relationship: student expectations and experiences of personal tutoring in higher education. *Journal of Further and Higher Education* 43(4): 533–544.