

Commuter students

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Overview



Definitions

Intersectionality

Outcomes

Previous research in England

Being a student or becoming a graduate

Recent research in Ireland

The commute

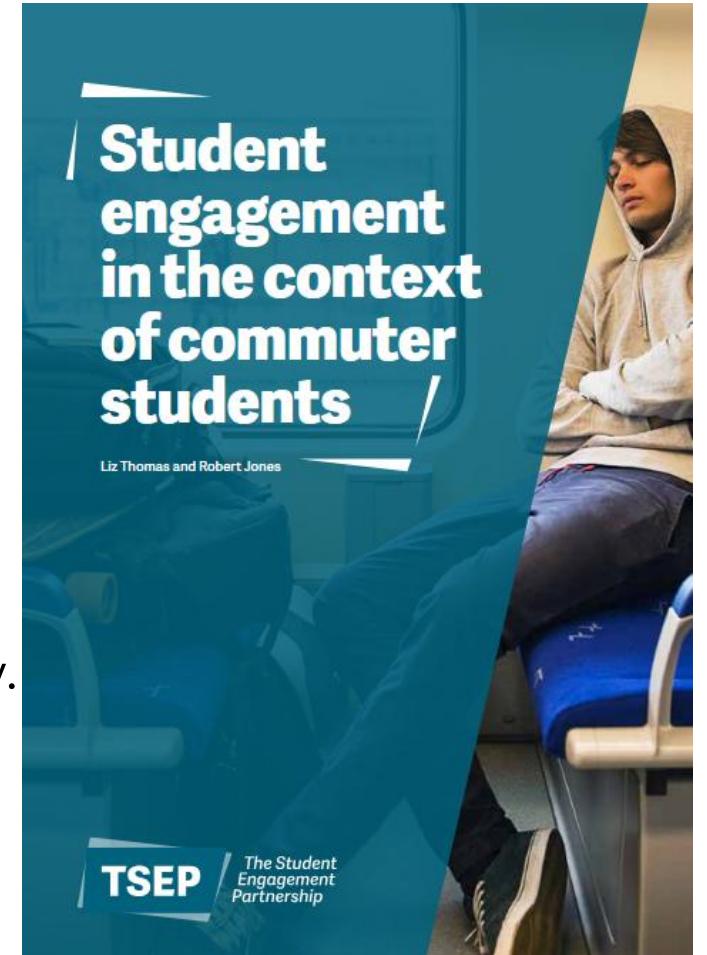
Inclusive experience: academic and wider

Enabling environment

Changing HEIs

Defining commuter students

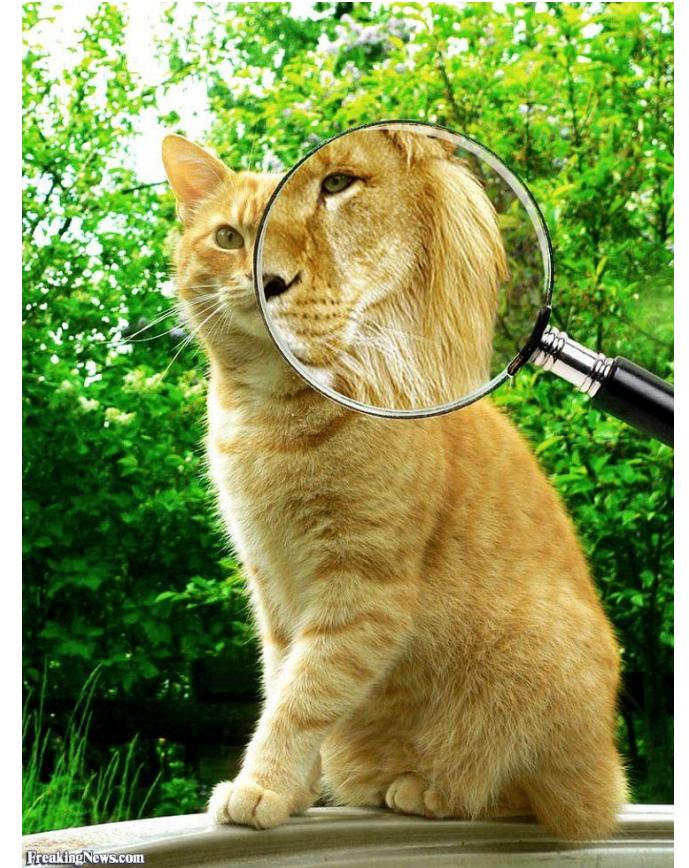
- Since the publication of research on commuter students in 2017 there has been increased discussion, research and finally some recognition of this student group.
- Differing terminology: commuter, live at home, local, off-campus, learn and go, stayeducation etc.
- Poorly defined group of students - even the idea that they remain in the family home is open to discussion, e.g. London, international students.
- Various HEIs have created their own definitions based on for example travel time and distance.
- Increasing there is a call to differentiate local students from commuter students, as well as from those who relocate to study. (e.g. Fulford 2021, Webb & Turner 2020)
- Given the lack of agreed definition commuter students are not monitored. Kenyon (2024) uses HESA data (term time accommodation) and asserts that 40% of students commute.



Intersectionality: Is ‘commut*’ a useful term?

Commuter students are more likely to:

- Have a lower household income
- Be from lower-socio-economic groups
- Be first generation entrants
- Be from an ethnic minority group
- Be a mature student
- Have studied at a state school
- Some evidence that also more likely to have a disability.
- Focusing on ‘commuting’ provides a useful lens to explore diverse student experience.



Commuter students' outcomes

- Typically commuting is correlated with poorer student outcomes, especially for longer commutes.
- Commuter students have lower rates of continuation (Woodfield 2014, Fulford (2021). 'Travel time' was found to predict student continuation (London Higher 2019).
- Commuting students have lower levels of attainment (e.g. Woodfield, 2014, Neves & Hillman, 2018, Webb & Turner, 2020, Butt & Hiley-Rayner, nd).
- Commuter students are less likely to be employed in a graduate job than students who relocated to study (The Institute for Employment Research, Artess et al., 2014; see also Maguire and Morris, 2018).
- Living at home impacts negatively on student wellbeing, especially for female students who have longer commutes (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023).

English research, Thomas & Jones 2017

- Commuting is time consuming, tiring, expensive and stressful.
- On campus students lack spaces and places and food is expensive.
- Many commuters view themselves good students who want a 'good degree'.
- Strategic decision-making: use their time 'more wisely'.
- Prioritise academic engagement over enhancement and social engagement.



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the technological HE
sector in Ireland,
Technological
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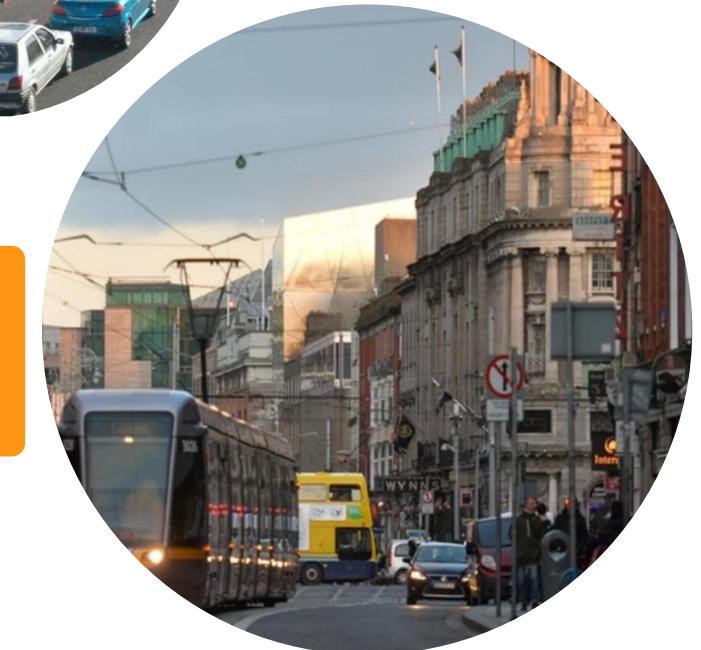
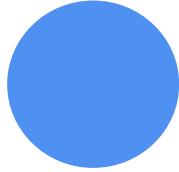


Transforming
Learning

Commuter students:
A student-centred, whole
provider approach to improve
student experiences and
outcomes in technological
higher education in Ireland

Research questions

- i. How does being a commuter student impact on student experiences and outcomes in technological HEIs in Ireland?
- ii. How can technological HEIs improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students?



Research methods

- Semi-structured review of HEI websites.
- Two online town hall focus groups.
- 33 THFG participants from four HEIs. Mostly students (27) and 6 staff members. 8 of the students were trained as facilitators and 'jurors'.



Conceptual framing: Whole provider approach



The Commute

The commute I take is 2hr 30 mins each way. I take the bus and travel 3 to 4 times a week. The good points of the commute: toilet on board and [I'm able] to charge electronic facilities [sic]. The challenges are the time lost and late for the first class in the morning.

I think overall commuting can be expensive between diesel and car maintenance costs, as well as buying meals in college.

[I'm] very tired throughout the day and when I get home, due to early starts. But having assignments etc to finish when I get home leads to me having less time to myself and poor sleep, usually late for my classes so am missing crucial time.

I commute every day, train often is delayed. I get the earliest train and the first bus possible but am usually 5-10 mins late for my classes. The train times are inconvenient with my timetable for going home as I'm usually left with 15 mins to get across the city to catch train or left for nearly 2 hours waiting for one. Busses can often be full at the end of the day and if I can't get on then I'm also more than likely missing my train home.

Commuter students want:



Financial support to help with transport costs and food on campus

Increase the number of buses, or provide private buses between HEIs and transport hubs or popular commuter locations

Encouragement and support for car sharing



Inclusive academic
experience?

Impacts academic success by having wasted hours each day stuck on a bus or waiting for buses that get delayed or don't show up. By the time I get home I've no time or energy to do study... Have to come early and leave late to avoid traffic, buses are a shambles and waste valuable time that I could be doing my college work sitting on the bus.



Commuting impacts on attendance three ways: arriving late due to delays; skipping lectures and using time in ways deemed more efficient; leaving early due misalignment of the teaching and travel timetables.



Commuting reduces time and wellbeing that impact negatively on independent study and academic outcomes.

Organisational issues

There's really been not a single adjustment in my college during my course of study so I would say it's affected me a lot but I just have to deal with it.

Negatively. No flexibility to support students who are commuting.

Education is tailored to people who are close to the campus or who live on campus. They seem to forget that some people are commuting over 2 hours to just get to class.

Staff attitudes and institutional culture

Staff try to be lenient, especially if you have to leave a few minutes early to make it for the bus. They are understanding if you are late etc.

.. still plenty of lecturers who don't understand the fact that we need to leave early to catch our bus and it often upsets them. They either ask us to just not show up to class as it will distract others or stay and miss the bus.

More negatively seen as an outcast compared to students who live on campus or near campus.

Perception of engagement - staff may view commuter students as less engaged in lectures if they skip them (due to travel time/cost/only 1 or 2 lectures that day) or do not sign up for clubs & societies.



The academic experience is not inclusive of commuter students

This is reinforced by the review of institutional websites. There are very few courses available through blended or flexible delivery and learning and teaching policies do not address commuter students directly

Commuter students want a compassionate response



Commuter compassionate timetable

Commuter compassionate attendance policy

Greater use of online learning resources and attendance

Commuter compassionate timing of assessments

More flexible academic support

Group working guidelines

Staff development



Inclusive wider
student
experience?

Students are largely resigned to not engaging in the wider student experience



The social side of college is non-existent, I have to arrange transport because trains stop at a certain time.

Negatively, makes socialising more difficult as there are restrictive bus times, and further distances to travel to get home.

Negatively socially, can't park overnight so even if I had a place to stay I can't go out very often.

Food places close early which can affect students that may want to study at the library after lectures.



The wider HE experience is not inclusive of commuter students

This is reinforced by the review of institutional websites, which prioritise accommodation and re-location, provide no information about daytime student activities and tend not to use commuter student stories or provide specific information and support to commuter students.

Commuter students want:



Online student support services

More information about the opportunities and support that is available

Daytime events

Alternative opportunities for engagement

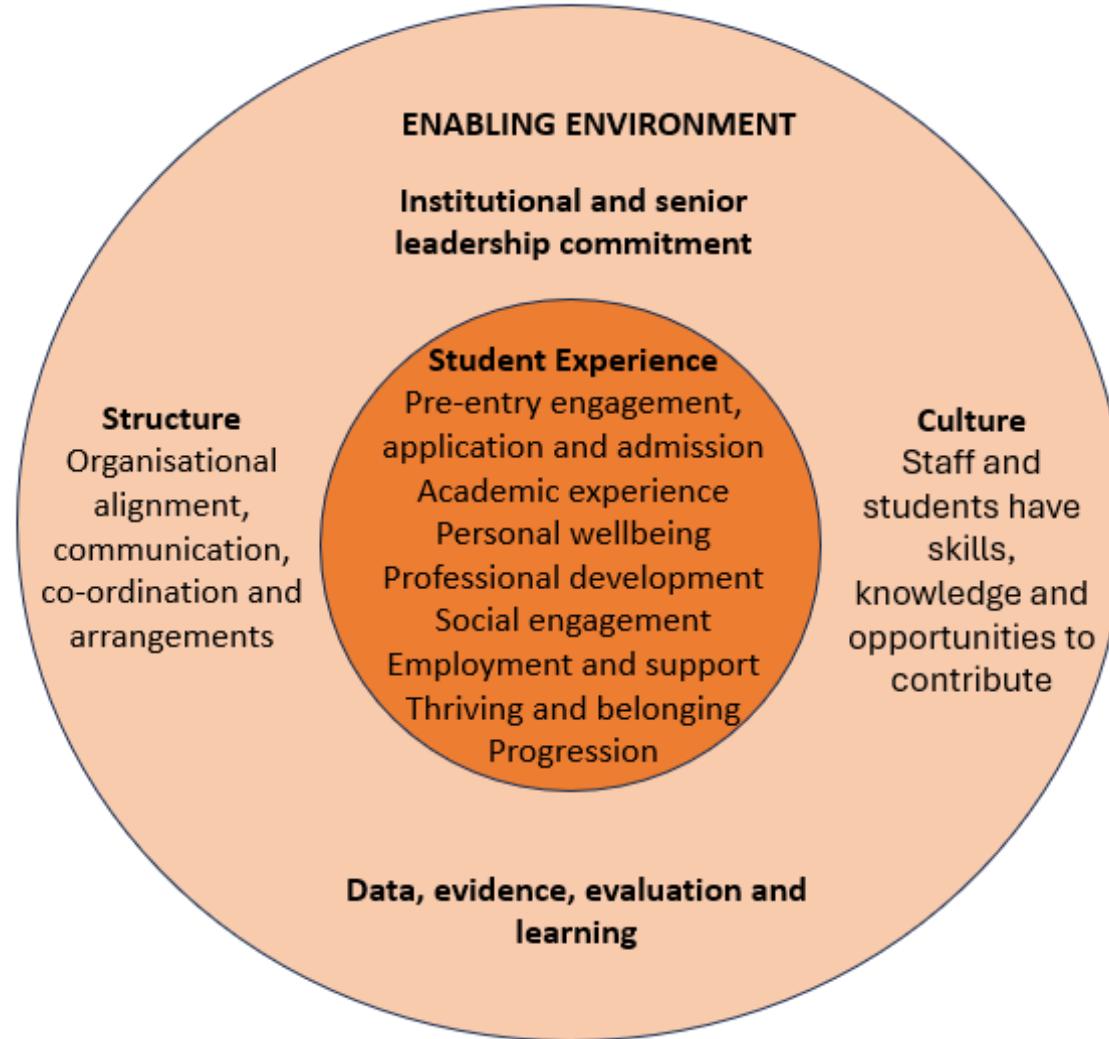
Commuter student voice and representation



A whole provider approach?

The review of websites suggests a partial and inconsistent approach to enabling commuter students to access and succeed. This is reinforced through the qualitative research with commuter students .

Whole provider approach



Enabling environment: Institutional conditions to facilitate an inclusive student experience

- **Institutional and senior leadership commitment:** Websites and institutional policies indicate lack of institutional commitment to commuter students. Commuter students are largely explicitly and implicitly absent in the contents of websites and texts of institutional documents.
- **Structure (policies and processes):** Timetabling, attendance, use of the VLE, provision of support, organisation of the wider student experience and student representation do not prioritise or recognise commuter students, and many disadvantage them.
- **Structure (communication):** Communication with and about commuter students is poor, e.g. by and to teaching staff, institutional catering and with transportation companies.
- **Culture (staff):** HEIs are not permeated by empathy towards and validation of commuter students. Some staff are understanding and supportive. Others are not, and this is reinforced by the institutional processes that do not require staff to have awareness, commitment and skills to ensure the inclusion of commuter students.
- **Culture (students):** Acceptance by commuter students themselves of their position; and not opportunities for them to have a voice and inform decision making.
- **Data and evidence:** No national or institutional definitions of commuter students and data is not widely collected about commuter student status, other characteristics, experiences and outcomes. Students want staff to know about their commuter students, to provide feedback and inform decision making.

Conclusions

- The Irish research suggests that to date there has been very little deliberate or explicit adaptation of HEIs to the needs of commuter students, despite recognition of an acute national shortage of student accommodation.
- The student experience is not inclusive, and this is reinforced by the commitment, structures, culture and use of evidence within the HEIs.
- There is not a way of defining commuter students, and little use of data and evidence to make commuters visible and to improve their experience.
- The WPA model has been a useful to critique the commuter student experience and make recommendations for change
- There is an urgent need for change at various levels, from classroom experiences, to institutional, regional and national transformation.

Recommendations

National policy
makers and
representative
organisations

Quick wins for
HEIs

For teaching and
support staff to
be commuter
compassionate

For institutional
websites

More significant
changes for HEIs

Further research
(national,
regional and
institutional)

Thank you Q&A Discussion

- What quick wins could you implement in your role to be 'commuter compassionate'?
- What mechanisms could be introduced to give commuter students more voice within your organisation?
- How could you collaborate with others to improve the commuter student experience?

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[Irish report](#), briefings and webinar can be accessed [here](#).