1 **The academic lives of commuter students: examining the use of the physical and digital**

2 **spaces within the contemporary university**

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10 **Abstract**

11 It is estimated that 40% of UK undergraduates commute to study, travelling varying distances,

12 and often daily. Although commuting can be challenging, many learners see it as a way to

13 access university, whilst maintaining existing commitments and support networks, and

14 offsetting growing costs of higher education (HE). This study employed a novel participatory

15 mapping technique to stimulate focus groups of second- and third-year undergraduates who

16 commute. We explored participants' engagement with their institution's campus, and

17 online/digital spaces. Our findings show commuters have nuanced and intentional interactions

18 with the University's physical and digital landscape. We consider how these interactions may

19 be mediated by distances commuters travel, their motivations for commuting, and the extent to

20 which they seek wider university experiences. Participants reported shortcomings in provision

21 of essential information at key moments (e.g., induction), which impacted their sense of

22 belonging to the campus. They also queried the relevance of some services commonly

23 perceived as important to the university experience (e.g. students union). Our findings indicate

24 limited visibility of the sizeable commuter population within institutional practices and

illustrate the heterogeneity of their university spatial experiences. We discuss implications for the widening access agenda and democratic functioning of universities, Finally, we consider how to optimise spatial engagement of commuters, to enhance their sense of belonging, engagement, and retention.

Keywords: commuter students, non-traditional students, student belonging, widening participation, higher education

Introduction

Why commuter students' matter

Some undergraduate students choose to live at home and commute for studies, with numbers rising (Finn, 2017; BlackBullion, 2024). These commuter students share many characteristics with learners from underrepresented groups (Lowe and Gayle, 2007). They are more likely to be mature (Evelyn, 2002), have a minority ethnic background, and live in a low-income household (Artess, McCulloch and Mok, 2014). Consequently, commuters can have multiple demands on their time (e.g. work, caring), which likely impact how they access and engage with HE (Newbold, 2015; Thomas, 2020). Commuting helps mitigate costs of university (BlackBullion, 2024). Post Covid, even more students commute (Adams, 2023; Kenyon, 2025); many exploiting technological options that expanded during the pandemic (Turner et al., 2024b). Nevertheless, lack of an agreed definition of commuter students (Maguire and Morris, 2018), and limited monitoring by institutions (Kenyon, 2024a), means the size of this group has not been established systematically. Estimates from the UK are sizeable, however, at ~40% of undergraduates (HESA 2022; Kenyon, 2024a).

Commuter experiences in UK HE

Limited institutional and sectoral monitoring of commuters can drive false assumptions about the homogeneity of their profiles. In reality, there is substantial variation in factors such as travel distance. Cross-continental research links longer commutes with lower attendance and participation in campus activities; impacts on belonging and well-being; and reduced attainment (Coutts et al., 2018; Kobus et al., 2015; Kuh et al., 2001; Leveson et al., 2013; Taylor and Mitra, 2021). Hence, in the current study we differentiate local commuters from *regional* counterparts, with longer journeys.

Institutions do not routinely consider commuter students' needs (Tett et al., 2025), despite literature detailing common challenges (e.g. Maslin, 2024b; Porkorny et al., 2017; Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2020). In *practical* terms, commuters are vulnerable to travel disruption, which can generate financial pressures and stress (Chapprell et al., 2020; London Higher, 2019). In *social* terms, commuters report less sense of belonging, often struggling to integrate with peers (Jacobly and Garland, 2004; Hallam, 2023). The importance of successful integration with lecturers and course peers has long been discussed (e.g. Tinto, 1993). Suboptimal integration with the wider university community, and its campus environs, is thought to compound a sense on unbelonging (Wong 2023; Gravett et al, 2023). Meanwhile, in *academic* terms, lower grades and higher rates of attrition have also been reported amongst commuters (Artess et al., 2014; Maguire and Morris, 2018; citation removed for PR). Recent inclusion of commuter students in the UK Office for Students 'Equality of Opportunity Risk Register', represents formal acknowledgement of challenges they face, and the need for institutions to respond (OfS, 2024).

Outdated perceptions of commuters in a changing HE marketplace

In some countries, *local* university attendance is the norm (Holdsworth, Garner and Jacobly, 2004; Kobus et al., 2015; Taylor and Mitra, 2021). Growth in commuter numbers suggests UK HE is converging toward patterns of student living arrangements seen elsewhere (e.g. the Netherlands). Nonetheless, experiences of UK commuter students have, historically, been constructed as 'lesser' (Finn and Holton, 2019); the system privileging the residential model of engagement, (Christie, 2007; Callendar and Melis, 2022). This perspective looks increasingly outdated, set against diversification in courses on offer. Online, hybrid and short course provision (i.e. so-called micro-credentials) has expanded in the UK (Cotterill, 2025; Rowsell, 2025). National reforms to student finance – in the form of the 'Lifelong Learning Entitlement – will further facilitate English learners in accessing shorter, intensive forms of study (e.g. individual credit-bearing modules) (OfS, 2023), where full relocation is not required. Clearly, any lingering sense that remaining in an existing home represents a 'deficit' mode of accessing university needs to give way (e.g. Finn and Holton, 2019' Tett et al., 2025). Instead, universities are encouraged to recognise that students 'reside' at university in multiple, and equally legitimate ways (Holton and Finn, 2018; Jacobly and Garland, 2004).

Understanding commuter students' motivations

Market trends towards commuting may be fuelled by the varied opportunities it offers. Christie (2007; later reinforced by Finn and Holton, 2019), describes commuting as a positive, agentic choice. It allows students to realise ambitions, maintain relationships, and preserve economic stability (Hope and Quinlan, 2021). For students typically underrepresented in HE, support from family and friends can ease transitions and mitigate alienation experienced on starting university (Mishra, 2020; Kahn, 2009; Tett et al., 2025).

97 Students with disabilities or poor mental health can study, without disrupting support

98 networks near their existing address (Riddell et al., 2024).

99

100 Importantly, recent empirical research reaches beyond monitoring of commuter student

101 numbers, exploring commuters' motivational outlook in detail (Maslin, 2024a). Underneath

102 broad evidence that commuters prioritise academic engagement over social and

103 extracurricular activities (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022), self-reports suggest significantly

104 higher levels of certain positive study behaviours, compared with campus-dwelling peers

105 (e.g. accessing library resources, seeking advice from staff, citation remove for PR). Hence,

106 there is reason to hypothesise that commuter students can excel, given suitable conditions.

107

108 Thomas (2020) documented the value judgements commuters made historically, regarding

109 which activities to *physically* attend. Post Covid, commuters may not face such stark

110 decisions as they self-manage learning (citation remove for PR). 'Transformative' digital

111 spaces (Finn, 2017) enable individuals to occupy multiple spaces simultaneously. Individuals

112 can draw strategically on digital options (e.g. online tutorials, lecture recordings) to strike a

113 balance between physical and virtual engagement that facilitates study in the face of their life

114 circumstances. Unfolding technological advances may be strengthening commuter models of

115 engagement. Hence, there is pressing need for universities to understand which physical and

116 digital spaces optimise commuter students' engagement and sense of belonging.

117

118 ***The role of university spaces in shaping student experience***

Thompson et al. (2025: 51) advocate 'developing user-centric perspectives' of the campus experience, for the diverse users of university campuses (e.g. students, staff and visitors). Commuter students represent a substantial and interesting subgroup within this community.

In terms of *physical* space, universities provide residential facilities (e.g. student halls), which can be central to the 'student experience' of undergraduates who relocate to study (Holton, 2018). More relevant for commuters are physical spaces provided for learning, through interactions with lecturers and peers, or via independent study (e.g. lecture halls, study spaces) (Ellis and Goodyear, 2016; Gravett et al., 2023; Temple, 2018). Universities also provide physical spaces for students to network with peers during cultural and recreational activities (e.g. Student Union facilities, Berman, 2020; Thompson et al., 2025).

Temple (2018) cautions that the built environment can be too easily 'treated as of little consequence to students' (Temple, 2018: 134). In reality, students experience university spaces in diverse and powerful ways (Thompson et al., 2025; Wong, 2023). A space perceived as safe and welcoming for one group can be exclusionary for others, perpetuating entrenched hierarchies (Malman et al., 2021; Temple, 2018). This is particularly true for students who are underrepresented in higher education. University spaces are, according to Puwar (2004: 9), 'gendered, classed and racialised.' Although physical university spaces appear fixed, they draw their full form and impact from power relations between the dominant users (Ellis and Goodyear, 2016; Thompson et al., 2025). For example, students from lower socio-economic profiles often report feeling peripheral to activities that middle class peers engage in with confidence (Brookes, 2008; Reay et al., 2018). To recognise the phenomenon of 'socially constructed' space, Wong (2023) encourages a shift in focus from

physical space itself to questions of *who* is using spaces; *how* they interact with these spaces; the social networks and relationships that emerge; and the resulting impacts on students' sense of belonging. Temple (2018) emphasises that socially imbued spaces are also fluid and potentially malleable. Students might, for example, challenge existing hierarchies, albeit that such transformations are unlikely to be straightforward. The long history of student 'sit ins' offers one manifestation (Brookes, 2017).

Post pandemic, there have been moves to re-energise campuses, which represent the primary physical and financial asset for many institutions. Singular focus on the physical, however, overlooks significant changes to how students are accessing learning (Danvers and Well, 2025). *Digital* spaces operate alongside physical spaces, supporting learning on and off campus (Gravett et al., 2023). The contemporary student typically has access to a powerful topography of digital spaces, incorporating virtual learning environments (e.g. Moodle), lecture footage, web conferencing platforms, digital library catalogues, reusable learning objects (e.g. H5P), and free-to-download software.

Focus of the current study

Wong (2023) notes limited research into connections between university spaces and belonging for students from underrepresented groups. In response, the current study recognises recent technological advances, probing commuter students' experiences of physical *and* digital spaces, provided by their university. Specifically, this paper addresses the following research questions:

RQ1: How do commuter students interact with university spaces?

166   RQ2: How do commuters students' interactions with university spaces shape their

167   sense of belonging?

168

169   **Research Design**

170   ***Study university***

171   Ethical approval was granted by the study university - a publicly funded 'newer' university in

172   southwest England, a region with low HE participation (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018b).

173   Overall, 59% of the domestic student body originate from southwest England, with analysis

174   of home/ term-time post codes indicating48% commute from an existing residential address.

175   The substantial volume of commuters coincides with reports that newer universities attract

176   more commuters than research-focused institutions (Finn and Holton, 2019).

177   Turning to demographics, the volume of undergraduates from most deprived neighbourhoods

178   (IMD1) is slightly below sectoral average (6.4% versus 8.8%). Conversely, the institution

179   recruits strongly from other underrepresented groups. The volume of mature undergraduates

180   (30.4%) and those with declared disability (20.1%) exceeds sectoral averages (29.0% and

181   17.4% respectively). These trends fit in with high levels of commuting: underrepresented

182   students tend to opt for 'local' providers, as this is perceived as 'less risky' than moving to

183   another town (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a). Notably, 10.8% of the undergraduate population

184   comes from minority ethnic groups, compared to 26.5% for the sector. This reflects lower

185   diversity in the southwest, where the institution recruits heavily.

186

187   *Sampling protocol*

188 The study focused on second- and third-year undergraduates, who have had significant time

189 to visit campus and established study habits, relative to first years.

190

191 Initially, we sought to apply stratified sampling, by using post-code data in conjunction with a

192 random number generator, to identify individuals to invite into the project. Despite inviting

193 250 commuters this way, engagement was limited. Hence, we pivoted to convenience

194 sampling, comprising an open email call to recruit commuter students, distributed via key

195 departmental contacts (e.g. programme leads). Whilst we recognise potential drawbacks of

196 convenience sampling, in terms of representativeness and generalisability, we feel it is an

197 acceptable approach given the *exploratory* nature of the study (Ahmed, 2024). Given lack of

198 consensus in how to define commuter students (Kenyon, 2024a), potential participants were

199 prompted students to self-identify as commuters if they lived in their own home or a family

200 home. Recognising the diversity of commuter student profiles (Maslin, 2024a;2024b),

201 individuals who went forward into the study were also asked to self-identify if they

202 commuted locally (from within the city), or from the wider region,

203

204 *Data collection*

205 Data were collected through focus groups, which included a participatory mapping activity.

206 Focus groups enable participants to 'share and compare their ideas and experiences' (Morgan,

207 1997 cited in Cousins, 2009: 52). Participatory mapping invites individuals to annotate

208 maps, indicating places they use. Through self-reflection and dialogue, individuals then

209 elaborate on their experiences of a space, motivations for using it, who they use it with, and

210 which places they *do not* use (Ralls and Pottinger, 2021). According to Ralls and Pottinger

211 (2021: 2), participatory mapping reveals 'new possibilities and potential […] about a place.'

212 and, in combination with focus groups, creates a forum to explore individual participant

213 responses collaboratively, in detail.

214

215 Whilst the full focus group schedule is available in the [supplementary information], the

216 protocol was as follows. Initially, participants discussed motivations for attending university

217 as a commuter, as well as travel- and study-related experiences. Attention was paid to the

218 online tools used to support learning and interact with peers/ lecturers. Next came the

219 participatory mapping. Campus maps and question sheets were distributed (see

220 [supplementary information]), and participants had ten minutes for annotating maps and

221 responding to questions. Working independently, participants were prompted to consider

222 spaces used (or not); purpose and timing of use; and who they used the space with. Finally,

223 participants reconvened to discuss responses.

224

225 From July- October 2024, five focus groups were held (three on campus, two online),

226 exceeding the minimum of two to three recommended for capturing relevant themes (Guest et

227 al., 2016), and enhancing diversity within the sample. Campus-based and online formats

228 acknowledged participants' status as commuters. In total, 19 students participated: 12 local

229 commuters (hereafter referred to as LC), and seven regional commuters (RC). Table 1

230 presents an overview of composition of focus groupa and participant profiles

231

232 Table 1: Summary of focus group composition and participant profiles

233 INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

234

Data analysis

Focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed, and checked for accuracy by student researchers. In collaboration with the project lead, Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic analysis was then used to determine themes within the data. Initially, the project lead and student researchers read transcripts independently, to become familiar with the data and generate initial codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The group then convened to review initial codes and apply them to the first transcript. There followed a reflective discussion on through which key themes were defined and named (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Student researchers then analysed remaining transcripts, with the lead researcher reviewing the themes and their application, so validating and expanding work undertaken by the student researchers.

Student researchers

Three students, Emily, Asal and Harriett, operated as researchers, bringing authentic and insights to data collection and analysis (Greene, 2014). They helped develop the focus group schedule, organised and undertook data collection, and supported the initial cycles of data analysis. Student researchers were themselves undergraduates, so putting participants at ease and facilitating dialogue around topics.

Findings

This section addresses RQ1, exploring how commuter students interact with university spaces, and how physical and digital spaces can both create and constrain their' experiences.

RQ2, which focuses on implications for commuter students' sense of belonging, is addressed

in the Discussion.

Commuter students' interactions with <u>physical</u> university spaces

Primarily, participants journeyed to campus for *timetabled* sessions. The location of these

sessions determined which buildings and facilities on campus they engaged with:

> '*And then for my study time, I most of the time go either to [names Building A],*
>
> *sometimes I have workshops or lectures in [names Building B] or like a [names*
>
> *Building C]. In my study time, it's going to be either [Building A, B or C]. I never go*
>
> *to [names Building D and E] because I never have any lectures there.'* LC, FG1.

Participants rarely ventured elsewhere, with several recognising their limited use of campus:

> '*I feel like [names building] is at the top end of the uni. I don't tend to go up there*
>
> *like to [names buildings] and stuff like that. I tend to just stay around the bottom end*
>
> *of the uni.* RC, FG5.

Informal engagements, where students explore the spaces they may or may *not* use, help

foster belonging (Wong, 2023). However, it appears that such exploration was largely left to

chance:

> '*I'm not sure if I missed something, but when I first came in, I didn't really have any*
>
> *idea where everything was. As far as I'm concerned, I might have missed some sort of*
>
> *induction, but I was never really shown where everything is, so I kind of just had to*
>
> *find out on my own.'* LC, FG4.

Several participants drew similar connections between (limited) information during initial

transition / induction experiences, and their *on-going* interactions with – and sense of

280 connectedness to – campus, For commuters, the lack of a formal introduction to campus is

281 likely followed by fewer naturally occurring opportunities to explore space(s), compared with

282 relocated students As Thomas (2020) explains, commuters only attend campus for specific

283 activities, and leave promptly, possibly, to fulfil commitments outside of university, or

284 because of the vagaries of public transport.. Ramifications could persist throughout

285 individuals' studies (Tett et al., 2025): to recap, participants were second- and third-year

286 students who, one might have expected to be familiar with formal and informal spaces across

287 the campus (Berman, 2020; Thompson et al., 2025).

288

289 Discussions about how participants spend time *between* sessions expanded the sense of

290 difference from relocated peers, who lived in university or private rented accommodation

291 close-by. Whilst participants reported using this time to meet peers or undertake course-

292 related work, they also identified these intervals as challenging, especially when they sought

293 a break from study:

294   *'If you live in accommodation, you can easily go to your room, stay there till the later.*

295   *But [as a commuter] all your friends leave, you're just alone, your train is like in two*

296   *hours, so you have nothing else to do you just go to the library and do stuff because*

297   *you're just bored.'* RC, FG3.

298 This is one of several examples of how the campus privileges certain patterns of student

299 participation, creating what Finn and Holton (2019:18) call a 'hierarchy of mobility

300 practices.' Mobilities and engagement practices associated with the residential model of

301 university attendance, where students are immersed in their subject of study and university

302 life, are normalised over the 'everyday mobility practices' of commuter students (Finn and

303 Holton, 2019). Participants felt their real-life experiences conflicted with expectations. For

example, one participant recounted an exchange with their lecturer about moving into shared accommodation - something they did not want to do:

> *'I do think that there is a perception that if you stay at home, or if you commute to university, if you don't live on campus or near campus in halls with your mates or anything like that, that you're somehow less of a student, that you're not having the experience, which is not true. I would not say you're missing something.'* LC, FG3.

A minority of participants found innovative solutions to fulfil their unmet needs. For example:

> *'Probably something I am not supposed to do [hesitates] is when you reach that time of that day when you've done some studying, I book a room to watch TV. That sounds bad! Because unlike people who can just go back to their accommodation there's no space, you can just be by yourself on campus.'* LC, FG3.

Participants were tentative in detailing such use of university spaces. Whilst such adaptations may represent participants taking ownership of a space (as proposed by Temple, 2018), they depend upon free space being available; the presence of peers (to generate the courage for subverting how space can be used); and avoiding discovery. This reinforces a sense of having a 'peripheral' presence on the campus. This example also demonstrates how university spaces can 'other' students (Temple, 2018; Gravett et al., 2023; Brenan 2020). The need for individual commuters to create spaces to meet basic needs highlights their 'invisibility' from institutional policy and planning.

Interestingly, the study university has invested in student-facing spaces to meet commuter requirements. These provide hot water, microwaves and comfortable furniture. However, awareness of these spaces was limited:

> *'I do find that I end up spending more on coffees here and there because I'm out of the house. I don't know if I'm just unaware of them, but I don't know if there's anywhere, I could make a hot drink myself with stuff I've brought in from home.'* RC, FG5.

These spaces tended to be in areas of campus participants did not use (e.g. the students union),or discovered only accidently. Creating these spaces appears insufficient by itself. Rather, active promotion of such facilities to commuters is needed especially if, like current participants, they are not proactively exploring the campus.

Given frustrations over lack of relaxation space, it is notable that participants made minimal reference to the students' union. Students' unions are ubiquitous in UK universities, working to represent the interests of current and future students (Day 2012). They usually have a physical presence on campuses, playing 'a crucial role in delivery...of 'the student experience' – from social events, through to sports activities and 'employability' activities' (Brooks et al.,2015: 472). Only three references were made to the Students' Union. One participant reported using their guidance services; another mentioned the seating outside the Union building; and a third mentioned the shop. The Students' Union at the study university is located centrally, near the library. It has also invested in facilities of relevance to commuter students (e.g. lockers), and hosts cafes, where commuters might relax between sessions/ journeys. Student unions have been recognised as problematic spaces for underrepresented groups (Brooks et al., 2015), however, reflecting dominant perspectives on their function and who they serve. Whilst holding a central role in the *extra-curricular* life of many students,

350 student unions nowadays serve an increasingly important function in representing student

351 interests to university leaders (Brooks et al., 2015). They ensure voices of underrepresented

352 groups are heard through, for example, part-time elected officers who act as figureheads, and

353 maintenance of student networks to reflect an increasingly diverse student body (Dubber,

354 2024). For commuters, the *social* function of student unions may be less apposite, as it is not

355 central to their interactions with the university (Gravett et al., 2023; Thomas, 2020).

356 Meanwhile, some commuters may also assume that the *advocacy* function does not extend to

357 them, as members of the 'hidden' commuter community. The latter perception may be

358 unjustified, given good practice at several UK universities, which explicitly seek to recognise

359 and support commuter students through dedicated networks (e.g. Jarvis, 2019; SU

360 Manchester, undated). Nonetheless, there is an imperative for students' unions to consider

361 how they communicate their role and remit to the *whole* student body. This can be

362 challenging in universities with a diverse and fragmented student body.

363

364 Libraries are a focal point of student-led learning, described by O'Donnell & Anderson

365 (2022: 236) as at the 'epicentre of university life'. Indeed, the library was referred to by 18

366 participants. This quotation encapsulates the varied functions of the library:

367   *'It is a big facility. It's got everything you kind of need. It's got printers, it's got paper,*

368   *it's got the books, it's got the computers, it's got the cafe, it's got the [names a facility]*

369   *if you need help, they have the wellbeing section now where you can just sit, and it's*

370   *got like comics and stuff, and you can just relax. It's like the core, I think.'* LC, FG2.

371 Not everyone felt at ease using the library, however. Two participants used it only when

372 accompanied by course peers:

'I go to the library if it's with other people and for something that we are doing like group.' ==LC==, FG5.

'I go to the library, but I wouldn't go personally but I go because of the others.' ==LC==, FG3.

All participants identified some drawbacks with the library. ==Several described it as a challenging space to use, citing noise and, busyness that was not conducive to concentration.==

Some participants mentioned adaptions that improved their experience of using library space:

'I tend to put on music in the background to make me concentrate and not get distracted' LC, FG1.

Others, however, responded by studying at home:

'In terms of my own sort of studies, I find it overwhelming and busy on the campus, I can't concentrate. So, I just do that at home.' ==RC==, FG4.

Participants who spent more time on campus were aware of ==potentially hidden or secluded quiet spaces in the library==:

'[names area in the library is the perfect on because its quiet and no one is allowed to speak' ==LC==, FG3.

Meanwhile, a minority actively explored the campus for alternative study spaces:

'I found a good one the other day over [names building]. I didn't even know they had study spaces in there. It's gorgeous, yeah. I went in there and I went upstairs, and I was like, oh my goodness, there's these cool little pods and there's these highchairs, they're all empty.' ==LC==, FG2.

Patterns of interactions with physical campus spaces

The frequency of participants' visits, and attitudes towards the University, were influenced by how far they lived from campus. The seven regional commuters made limited use of the campus. This was anticipated outcome; long commutes have been identified as 'discouraging participation' in campus activities, and commuter students aim to compress campus commitments to avoid unnecessary visits (Leveson et al., 2013; Taylor and Mitra, 2021). Regional participants conformed with what they described as *'mandatory attendance'* (RC, FG3), engaging remotely for other activities. Consistent with previous literature (Chappell et al., 2020; Thomas, 2020), regional commuters attributed their pattern of engagement to costs and time involved in travel, as well as wider commitments. Their behaviours appear to meet the description of 'transactional interactions' with campus whereby, aside from attending taught sessions, there is indifference to the campus and facilities provided (e.g. Taylor and Mitra, 2021):

> *'I just come in and go home [...] strictly business.'* RC, FG2.

Transactional interactions with campus were also evident amongst participants with strong local connections, who voiced a disassociation from what they perceived as the 'mainstream' student identity:

> *'I don't go to like those sorts of places that students tend to go to because I'm from [names city], I had a job in [names city]'.* LC, FG5.

Tett et al., (2025) discusses how commuter students' sense of attachment to home is important, with possible implications for their connectedness to university. Commuter students comfortable with their home community do not necessarily perceive university as place to make friends. Where commuters make an *agentic* decision to form limited emotional

18

attachments at university, there may be no problem. Tett et al. (2025) does, however identify a potential trade-off; limited engagement may impede understanding of support services and faculties that could benefit the time they spent on campus (Tett et al., 2025).

In contrast, 8 out of the 12 local participants regularly attended university *voluntarily* for independent study, to access resources, or to meet course peers:

> *'I come in Tuesday, Wednesday, Friday for my lectures, but I usually try and keep*
> *Monday and Thursday to come to the library.'* LC, FG2.

These participants expressed greater connectedness to the study university, and established routines of when and where to study (Gravett et al., 2023; Raaper et al., 2021). The group appear to have accumulated valuable social capital, which Thomas (2020) reported as often being absent in commuter students. The frequency with which these participants attended gave them detailed knowledge of the campus, such that they could, for example, describe preferred study spaces:

> *'I put my favourite place, the study booths in [names building].'* LC, FG5.

Individuals who made active choices to travel to campus for independent study could articulate how spaces fulfilled their physical and psychological needs (Beckers et al., 2016; Danvers and Wells, 2025). Participants noted aspects such as comfort, and whether spaces were conducive to study:

> *'I do quite like the [names building], which I would recommend to [names a*
> *participant] if you ever wanted to go to that building. It was quite a nice building.*
> *They've got plenty of seating and several floors. They have computers there and the*

441   *seating's all like, quite a lot of couches and things like that. So, I find it quite*

442   *comfortable to kind of go there and just chill or do my work.'* <mark>LC</mark>, FG4.

443   These participants described being at university as a positive experience, valuing what

444   Danvers and Wells (2025: 43) call the 'presence accountability' i.e. studying in the same

445   space as other students, to build motivation for learning. Attending campus separated home

446   from university space, removing domestic noise and distractions (Danvers and Wells, 2025:

447   36) and enabling participants to focus on their studies:

448   *'For me there is because I get distracted a lot at home. Like, even if there's no people in my*

449   *house, I have a cat and that distracts me a lot. That's why I come here most days.'* LC, FG2

450   Importantly there was a sense that presence on campus allowed participants to embrace their

451   identity as students, and form connections with the physical campus and wider university

452   experience.

453

454   ***Commuter students' interactions with <u>digital</u> spaces***

455   Digital tools reduce the need to be physically present for learning and interacting with peers.

456   Consequently, for many students, boundaries between home and university are blurred

457   (Eringfield, 2021; Gravett et al., 2023). Post pandemic, students and lecturers can connect in

458   a 'myriad of ways' Casey et al. (2025: 179). Such use of technology was reported by several

459   participants. Nine individuals identified the study university's virtual learning environment

460   (VLE) as facilitating access to course-related content; extending learning; connecting with

461   the discipline; or interacting with peers/ lecturers through, for example, completing tasks or

462   posing questions:

463   *'Another thing I think that is useful is like obviously on the VLE, like you can just put*

464   *out questions and then the lecturers can answer, and it goes to literally everyone*

465   *who's on that module.'* LC, FG5.

466

467   Lecture capture was seen as a liberating force by all participants, removing potential travel

468   barriers not experienced by campus-based peers:

469   *'It gives you that equal opportunity for people who can get to campus.'* RC, FG2.

470   Participants also referenced wider learning benefits of lecture capture reported since the

471   pandemic (e.g. Noordman et al., 2021; Wang, 2023) e.g. scope for revisiting content on

472   demand, and enhanced inclusivity. Whilst lecture capture was instrumental for regional

473   participants in removing the need to travel, local commuters also appreciated the flexibility to

474   engage at a personally convenient time, rather than when the timetable dictated:

475   *'I tend to be better at home in my own environment, because it's more peaceful and*

476   *I'm more comfortable. I find the recorded lectures very helpful. I watch them when I'm*

477   *ready to study.'* LC, FG1.

478   Flexibility can be essential for commuters, allowing them to balance study and wider

479   commitments (citation remove for PR). Implicitly, lecture capture provision signalled the

480   study university recognised commuters' need. Therefore, when it was withdrawn suddenly

481   from two participants' courses, they felt frustrated and overlooked:

482   *'For students like me that it would really benefit. And I don't think it's fair that I, if my*

483   *train's delayed or cancelled, that I then miss out on that lecture.'* RC, FG4

484

485 Technology played an important role in connecting peers. Indeed, it is a recognised enabler of

486 social and community connections (de Laat and Dohn, 2019). Several participants reported

487 using meeting institutionally supported platforms to 'co-study' with peers (e.g.MS Teams,

488 Zoom):

489   *'We do Zoom meetings between the cohort, and we've got a group chat. That sort of*

490   *everyone just chips into motivate each other.'* RC, FG5.

491 Creating digital spaces for peer interaction, removing the need to travel, could benefit

492 commuter students' sense of belonging, developing networks that foster social capital

493 (Raaper, et al., 2021; Mishra, 2020). Moreover, compared with physical spaces, which can be

494 imbued with social meaning and hierarchies (Temple, 2018; Wong, 2023), digital spaces may

495 be more open and malleable to meet the needs of commuter students.

496

497 Participants also took ownership, creating their own digital spaces. Each focus group made

498 references to cohort-level, student-led groups, hosted on platforms such as WhatsApp and

499 Instagram. Membership was highly valued, particularly by local commuter students who

500 sought a more holistic student experience:

501   *'WhatsApp groups are the common thing to communicate with. I got an invitation to*

502   *join the WhatsApp group, and I really appreciated that. And I just joined them*

503   *because I would be well familiar with what is going on.'* LC, FG4.

504 Participants' engagement with technology varied according to their overall outlook on

505 university. Those adopting a transactional relationship spoke positively about benefits to

506 learning but had minimal engagement with social media. Engagement with technology was

507 primarily functional:

508   *'I'm very, uni is uni, home is home. if I need to speak to people, I do it whilst I'm on*

509   *campus whilst I'm with them. That separation [...] so we [the cohort] use a WhatsApp*

510   *group which I'm not in, I left it.'* ==LC==, FG2

511 Though digital spaces played an important role in participants' experiences, some caution is

512 warranted. Enhancing digital provision might be seen as an 'easy win' for institutions seeking

513 to enhance commuter students' experiences e.g. by expanding platforms for online peer

514 collaboration. As Gravett et al. (2023) emphasise, such interactions need to be meaningful to

515 realise such gains. Also, the pandemic demonstrated considerable variation in digital access

516 and skills across learners (Williamson et al., 2020). Lessons needs to be learned, to ensure

517 commuters embrace digital opportunities , and are not alienated due to lack of access,

518 knowledge or confidence to take advantage of available tools (Hill et al., 2024).

519

Discussion

521 This paper used a novel, participatory mapping approach, to examine how commuter students

522 interact with physical and digital spaces at their university. Data indicated that commuters

523 have complex and potentially marginalising experiences when interacting with spaces. Fraser

524 and Honneth's (2003) framework of redistribution and recognition prompts us to consider

525 recognition of commuter students' needs as a matter of equity and equality of opportunity.

526 According to the authors, social justice not only requires fair distribution of resources, but

527 also the recognition of diverse identities and experiences. Despite paying identical fees, and

528 constituting a sizeable portion of students, our study indicates that commuter students remain

529 *partially* included and visible in university life. ==Whilst this study is based on one UK==

530 ==university, the core themes are likely to be widely repeated, given that an estimated 40% of==

531 ==undergraduates commute (HESA, 2022), with numbers continuing to rise (Adams, 2023).==

532 This study joins earlier research attesting to limited support or accommodations for commuter

533 students at UK universities (e.g. Maguire and Morris, 2018; Porkonry et al., 2017; Tett et al.,

534 2025; Thomas, 2020). Thus, there is a clear imperative for institutions to address this sense of

535 'partial citizenship.' by adjusting policy and practice in keeping with the unique profile of

536 *their* commuter community (Gabi and Shapre, 2021). It is likely that universities will need to

537 differentiate distinguish needs of local versus regional commuters (Thomas and Jones, 2017),

538 and draw institutional data creatively, to shine light on who their commuter students are.

539

540 Our study suggests that to enhance inclusion, universities should develop targeted

541 information, advice, and guidance (IAG) for commuter students. Lack of tailored information

542 at the beginning of university impacted our participants' interactions with the campus.

543 Perceived rules and practices that govern access, and *who* students see using a space, matters

544 (Wong, 2024; Gravett et al., 2023). Appropriate IAG can help in challenging perceived

545 hierarchies and reassuring commuter students they are both welcome and that their needs are

546 considered to be important.

547

548 Our findings highlight how commuter students' engagement with physical spaces is strongly

549 associated with formal timetabling. Participants made limited exploration of campus beyond

550 venues where timetabled sessions were held. The absence of tailored induction activities for

551 commuters means spaces intended to fulfil their needs may remain invisible, depriving early

552 opportunities to foster the belonging sought by *some* individuals (Wilcox et al., 2005)

553 Embedding student-focused services (e.g. informal learning areas, drink making facilities,

554 microwaves) within or close to frequently accessed *formal* teaching spaces might be helpful

555 (Beckers et al., 2016; Gabi and Sharpe, 2021). This approach reduces the obligation on

556 commuter students to spend limited campus time exploring the estate, instead embedding

557 facilities in familiar places and signalling visibly the institutional regard for commuters.

558

559 Our findings exposed commuter students' limited engagement with the students' union.

560 Research into commuter students' engagement with Students Unions is limited. To date,

561 discussions have focussed on the extra-curricular offer provided by students' unions and the

562 extent to which commuters partake (e.g., Maslin, 2024; Stalmirska and Mellon). This is a

563 restricted narrative, with further work required to explore commuter students' perceptions of,

564 and engagement with, students' unions more broadly. Of particular importance is the

565 engagement of commuters with students' unions' representation functions, which has

566 potential implications for democratic functioning of the student union (Brooks et al., 2015).

567 Commuter students may feel disproportionately detached from representational structures

568 which, in a toxic cycle, further weakens institutional responsiveness to commuter-specific

569 concerns. In anecdotal terms, it is worth reflecting that 'invisible' commuter students may

570 comprise a far greater proportion of the institutional student body, than groups with dedicated

571 student union groups.

572

573 Finn and Holton's (2019) notion of a 'hierarchy of mobility practices' emphasises how the

574 prioritisation of residential students' mobility patterns over commuter students, creates

575 barriers to engagement. Addressing this imbalance requires universities to integrate

576 commuter student realities into institutional policy and practice – a call made elsewhere (e.g.

577 Maguire and Morris, 2018; Thomas 2020) for which progress remains outstanding. The

578 creation of commuter-friendly physical spaces can support the development of social capital

579 by facilitating peer interaction and informal learning (Putnam, 2000; Temple, 2018).

580 Simultaneous advances in digital spaces offer further opportunities to enhance social capital

and *economic* capital (by reducing travelling expenses). Virtual communities of course peers may mitigate lower social inclusion reported by some commuters (Chrisitie, 2007; Salmirska and Mellon, 2022). Post covid, research exploring commuter students' engagement with peers, attributed an increased sense of social inclusion to the option for learners to connect beyond the campus, through digital media (Turner et al., 2024b). Commuter students' behaviour in creating and controlling their own digital spaces for co-studying and peer interaction illustrates the agency they take in shaping their university experience, even where physical campus provisions fall short (de Laat and Dohn, 2019; Temple, 2018). Commuters use of digital space for social interaction remains somewhat overlooked, warranting detailed investigation. Meanwhile, in terms of *independent* study activities, digital advances are again redrawing the commuter experience. Tools such as lecture capture and virtual learning platforms provide flexibility and autonomy, enabling commuter students to engage with learning on their own terms and balance competing commitments (Casey et al., 2025; Turner et al., 2024aa; Wang, 2023).

Within this study, participants alternately referred to 'home' as a place of learning *and* retreat, or a place centred on domestic obligations and distractions. The influence of home environment on commuter students' learning experiences was not part of the original research design. Therefore, we felt few meaningful conclusions could be extracted from the current data on this theme. To date, home has been an overlooked learning space for commuter students (Danvers and Wells, 2025). Gravett et al. (2023) argue that home is a central to student learning (particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic). Future work should explore how home spaces contribute to commuter students' learning experiences, and the extent to which institutional policies could better support learning in home environments. Similarly, as this study was exploratory, we did not explicitly consider detailed intersections between

606 space and participants' socio-economic status, ethnicity, wider responsibilities (e.g. caring /

607 employment), or additional needs. These factors often underpin students' decision to

608 commute, as well as shape their subsequent experiences of studying as a commuter student

609 (Artess et al., 2014; Maguire and Morris, 2018; Thomas, 2020). Consequently, future work

610 should consider how demographic different characteristics impact experiences of commuting

611 and university spaces.

612

613 **Concluding thoughts**

614 As the number of commuter students rises (Adams, 2023; Blackbullion, 2024), there is a

615 growing imperative on universities to reconsider how this cohort experience the spaces they

616 provide for learning, peer interaction, representation, and extracurricular engagement. Rather

617 than the campus being the focus of student belonging (Wong, 2024), commuters' experiences

618 of belonging may be borderless. This fits with the reality that many commuters are in a

619 frequent state of flux (Finn and Holton, 2019), moving between home and university, learning

620 on campus, online, at home and in the spaces between. Social networks can cross university

621 and home networks (Christie, 2007; Tait et al., 2025). The concept of 'borderless belonging'

622 emphasises the agency of commuter students in constructing meaningful connections across

623 multiple environments. Engagement is not constructed solely as physical presence but

624 broadened to recognise the value of remote participation—whether through digital options

625 such as virtual study groups, online discussions, or remote access to lectures (Casey et al.,

626 2025).

627

628 Moving forward, rather than reinforcing dichotomies between physical and digital spaces, or

629 between university and home, institutions could recognise the importance of students

630 defining an individual model of engagement based on personal needs and preferences.

631   Offering positive agency to students, to shape their use of university spaces, could help

632   enhancing the sense of belonging amongst commuter students (Tett et al., 2025).

633

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