Supporting Commuter Students in UK Higher Education: Opportunities to Enhance Policy and Practice

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Commuter students represent a significant, yet often overlooked, demographic within English higher education (HE). Historically, national policy and institutional practice have failed to adequately acknowledge distinct challenges they face. Using a novel participatory mapping activity, and focus group discussions with 19 commuter students, this paper identifies how commuters are excluded by dominant models of university participation. We examine students' interactions with campus, peers and staff. Findings reveal how structural norms—such as attendance expectations, financial support, and spatial assumptions—can marginalise learners who do not follow the residential model. Participants described feeling peripheral to university life, with their legitimacy as students sometimes questioned. Nonetheless, they demonstrated agency in navigating challenges, using commuting time and home environments as productive learning spaces. We identify seven areas where enhancements might be made. By reframing commuting not as a deficit, but a valid mode of engagement, institutions might better support underrepresented students and promote equity in HE.

Keywords: Commuter students, Higher education policy, Student belonging, Inclusive practice

Introduction

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been considerable attention on students who commute (Maslin, 2025; Kenyon, 2024, Turner et al., 2024). *Internationally*, commuting is a normalised mode of attendance (Kobus et al., 2015; Simpson and Burnett, 2019). Conversely, leaving home for university has, historically, been 'a deep-seated part of English culture' (Augar 2019: 195). It is important to consider *who* commutes. Commuter students are often drawn from underrepresented groups: for example, mature students returning to learning who

have limited geographic mobility (Hope and Quinlan, 2021) due to wider commitments (e.g. school-age children). ‘First-in-family' students may study locally to maintain family networks (Reay 2018), as observed amongst British Pakistani and British Bangladeshi students (Finn, 2017; Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018a). Underrepresented students can face barriers to entering and succeeding at university (Callender and Mells, 2022), such as limited academic preparation, disparities in secondary education, and sparse familial experience (Beach and Puaca, 2014; Reay 2018). Additionally, they report less sense of belonging, sometimes struggling to form friendships amongst peers with different education and life histories (Brooks, 2008). The challenge facing commuter students can be two-fold. Not only are they drawn frequently from underrepresented groups, such that they report the experiences above (Christie, 2007; Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022; Thomas and Jones, 2017), in addition, the physical separation involved with living away from campus can exacerbate a sense of alienation (Hillman, 2018).

Commuter students are academically motivated (Thomas, 2020; Turner et al., 2024), with technological advances facilitating their learning and networking (Hill et al., 2024; Turner et al., 2023; Turner et al., in review). However, like individuals who commute for employment (e.g. Chatterjee et al., 2020), they report frequent travel and its financial implications, as impairing emotional and physical wellbeing (Blackbullion, 2024; Chapparell et al., 2020). National policy largely overlooked commuter students until 2023, when the Office for Students (independent regulator for English Higher Education) introduced the Equality of Opportunity Risk Register. EORR identifies risks affecting students’ opportunity to succeed in HE (OfS, 2023). For commuters, four risks were identified: limited choice of course types and delivery mode (owing to restricted geographical mobility); insufficient academic support; insufficient personal support (including extracurricular opportunities); and financial pressures (OfS, 2024). Targeting interventions for different demographic groups may be beneficial. However, as many underrepresented groups also commute, initiatives addressing challenges of commuting have potential to improve prospects for a broad range of students.

This research examines consequences for commuter students, where they have limited visibility in national policy and institutional practice. It is guided by the question: *What is the impact of commuter students’ limited visibility in higher education policy and practice, on*

their HE experiences? Most students experience HE through interactions with the campus, peers, university staff, and online spaces (Wong, 2023). Therefore, we probe commuter students' perspectives on these elements, which are influenced by national policy and institutional practice. The paper seeks to inform efforts for supporting commuter students through their university lives.

Research Design

The setting is a 'new' university in southwest England. These institutions attract more underrepresented students than research-focused institutions (Benson-Eggleton, 2022), and higher numbers of commuters (Donnelly and Gamsum, 2018). Defining and identifying commuter students is problematic (Kenyon, 2025), with diverse approaches used across the sector (e.g. travel distance, matching home / vacation-time postcodes). When categorising students, it is important to recognise influential contextual factors, such as geographic location and transport infrastructure (Kenyon, 2024). At the study university, commuter students are drawn from a large geographic area, where public transport is vulnerable to disruption. Undergraduates with longer commutes demonstrate worse academic outcomes and greatest dissatisfaction with the commute (Artess et al., 2014; Neaves and Hewitt, 2021; Webb and Turner, 2020). Hence, we emulated earlier research (e.g. Webb and Turner 2020; Turner et al., 2024), using postcode data to identify 'regional' commuter students (who live outside the city limits), and 'local' commuters. Echoing other datasets (Donnelly and Gamsum, 2018), institutional data shows that 49% of UK-domiciled undergraduates enrolled at the main campus commute (33% regionally, 16% locally).

Ethical approval was obtained from the study university prior to data collection. An open call, distributed through academic departments, invited second- and third-year commuter students to participate. Established students were targeted (over first-years), as they have accrued substantial knowledge and experience of university. Data were captured through focus group discussions, which included a participatory mapping activity. Focus groups enable participants to 'share and compare their ideas and experiences' (Morgan, 1997 cited in Cousins, 2009: 52). Initially, participants were prompted to discuss their motivations for, and experiences of, attending university as commuters. They were then invited to undertake the participatory mapping activity, during which they annotated a campus map in response to

prompts about which areas of campus they engaged with, and for what purpose. This approach was informed by Ralls and Pottinger (2021) who describe participatory mapping as a powerful methodology for highlighting barriers to inclusion and belonging (Ralls and Pottinger, 2021). Outputs from the exercise were then used to drive further group discussions around participants' experiences of the highlighted spaces; their motivations for using them; and who they used them with. This approach is novel in commuter student research, where interviews and surveys have predominated (e.g. Hill et al., 2024; Maslin, 2025). Participants also volunteered information on their age and postcode, to allow categorisation as regional/ local commuters.

Five focus groups (FG) were held from July-October 2024: three in person (on campus) and two online. Overall, 19 students participated. Of these, 10 (53%) were mature students (i.e., over 21), broadly matching the institution's wider student body, where mature learners account for 45% of regional commuters and 46% of local commuters. Each FG was audio recorded, transcribed and analysed, following Braun and Clarke's (2013) thematic approach.

Emerging themes and relationships to national policy and institutional practice

Seven main themes emerged, each representing a potential area for enhancing commuter students' experiences and/or outcomes. In discussing each theme, we draw connections to national policy and institutional practice.

1. Recognising diverse motivations for commuting

Participants expressed diverse reasons for commuting. Interestingly, some motives departed from traditional discourse around student commuting, which focuses on cost and pre-existing commitments. For example, participants under 21 (n=9) reported commuting to maintain home comforts and support networks and offset costs. However, several also cited house moves during their compulsory education, whereby they sought to avoid similar upheaval. The remaining mature participants were mostly under 30. Several of these identified the communal model of residential engagement as potentially harmful to study success:

'I've got constant exams different deadlines we needed to be focused; living in halls could be distracting and my course is highly demanding courses' FG1, mature Local Commuter

Overall, there were 11 local commuters (LC) and eight regional commuters (RC). This split illustrates how commuters not only vary in *why* they commute but also the distances covered. Maslin (2025) considered this nuance essential when forming policy and practice, to ensure support matches commuter students' actual circumstances. Nonetheless, commuter students are often discussed homogeneously at national and institutional level. For example, recent documentary analysis found a small minority of institutions (10 of 81) that analysed the intersection between commuter status and other demographics (Marshall, 2025). Too 'generalist' an approach risks overlooking the multifaceted motivations for commuting, so limiting our understanding of associated challenges and appropriate support.

2. Legitimising the commuter mode of participation

Finn and Holton (2019) describe how the experience of live-at-home students has been constructed as 'lesser.' Similarly, current participants reported feeling on the periphery, most commonly regarding peer interactions:

'By living at home I'm missing something. I know like my course mates who are living together, they have more updates about the course. "They said like, have you heard the news?" I said "no," I know that it comes from them living together' FG1, younger LC.

'I feel as a home student, I didn't have the social part, I would have liked to go for social events but we're not in a normal [student] life situation.' FG3, younger RC.

For this participant, it seems reduced social opportunities may have been an expected – or perhaps accepted – trade-off from commuting. In some instances, however, participants felt the very 'legitimacy' of their university experience was called into question, because of commuting:

'I think there's this perception that those that stay home and go to university are somehow less of a student than people who live in accommodation and move away from home. My lecturer [kept saying] you've got to live those experiences of being away from home and all that.' FG3, younger LC.

Whilst the lecturer's comments may have been well-intentioned, the participant experienced them as othering. Further examples were offered, where staff showed limited awareness regarding diversity in student profiles and the experiences they seek at university:

> *'It's my way of choosing [what] is the best for me, okay it might not have been the best for them [their lecturer]. My clothes don't fit you and your clothes don't fit me so that's fine.'* FG3, under 21 LC.

Aside from the welcome addition of commuters to the EORR, there is no national policy to safeguard their interests. Nonetheless, individual institutions might be expected outline planned support for commuters in Access and Participation Plans (APPs) – statutory documents submitted to the OfS quinquennially. However, analysis of 81 APPs produced since inception of EORR, found only 54% directly referenced commuter students (Marshall, 2025). It appears that commuter students are still not at the centre of many universities' thinking.

3. Questioning a culture of presenteeism

Attendance monitoring is now commonplace in UK universities. It fulfils statutory regulations covering specific groups (e.g., international students requiring visas). It also likely forms a central plank in institutions' local practices for identifying welfare issues that can accompany non-attendance (Macfarlane, 2014). Whilst statutory obligations cannot be waived, a culture of presenteeism may prevail, even where flexibility is feasible (e.g. courses populatedby UK-domiciled learners). Indeed, eight participants identified institutional expectations around attendance as unsympathetic to their circumstances as commuters. Several experienced inflexibility regarding when and how they could engage, even when facing unforeseeable travel disruption:

> *'Lecturers are quite strict. [if] I say "oh my train's been cancelled I won't be able to make it today" they won't do it on Zoom no matter the circumstances'* FG4, mature RC.

Some participants received contradictory messages about their capacity for choice. Whilst lecturers may have sanctioned an element of choice, problems arose if attendance practices clashed with *institutional* policy:

183 *'I got an email out from the faculty saying that "if you do not attend, we can withdraw*
184 *funding and withdraw you from your studies."'* FG2, mature RC.

185 Such findings should not be taken simplistically, as evidence that participants are reticent to
186 travel to campus. Rather, as Thomas (2020) observed, commuter students make value
187 judgements regarding attendance, with the number of sessions timetabled for a given day
188 being key. Certainly, some participants prioritised attendance at hands-on sessions (e.g.
189 practicals, clinical classes), over didactic lectures:

190 *'I totally get it; you have to be in doing a practical thing. But a lecture when you're*
191 *sat in a room being talked at that's recorded as well. You don't need to attend that in*
192 *person.'* FG2, mature RC.

193 Participants perceived this as a reasonable strategy, which the university should accept.
194 However, many described a culture of presenteeism, that offered little recognition of the
195 wider commitments they were juggling, and the distances travelled:

196 *'I'd left my house at 20 past 7 yesterday morning. I didn't get home until gone seven in*
197 *the evening; it's a long day waiting around for the trains.'* FG5, mature RC

198

199 ***4. Identifying 'hidden' costs of commuting***

200 Living at home is often perceived as the cheaper option (Donnelly and Gamsum, 2018a).
201 Indeed, several participants chose to do soto minimise debt. The non-means tested loan
202 available to live-at-home students is, however, £1,000 lower than for residential counterparts
203 (Gov.UK, 2025a). The full impact of term-time residence, on potential borrowing, runs to
204 several thousand pounds per year, in some family circumstances. Commuters can become
205 reliant on family or work to address shortfalls. Regional commuters - who frequently had
206 additional financial obligations – felt cost implications of commuting were overlooked:

207 *'But obviously when it comes to student finance if you don't live in university*
208 *residences, then you get like a lower grant. I don't think it's taken into consideration*
209 *that you still have to pay rent no matter where you're living.'* FG5, younger LC

210 *'Because [names course] so we work sort of through the summer as well. So, there's*
211 *the parking and then the expense of the train [all year]. There isn't any help for that,*
212 *any support for that.'* FG5, mature RC

Participants described incidental costs incurred on campus. Whereas residential peers might return home for lunch or between timetabled sessions, commuters spent full days on campus, often having to buy refreshments:

> *'[…] in a cafe and we've all got to buy something which is another expense. Which is fair enough, obviously, because cafes are there to make money, but it's all an added expense.* FG5, younger LC

Participants' concerns echo the national picture. With increased costs of living, commuters are experiencing financial pressures that impact their wellbeing and engagement with campus-based activities (BlackBullion, 2024). Financial realities facing commuter students are challenging to reconcile. At institutional level, universities commonly offer monetary support, such as bursaries for specific groups (UCAS, 2025), or grants at points of crises (Gov.UK, 2025b). Given the scale of the commuter community, however, this is not a sustainable solution. Rather, universities might explore appropriate flexibility in attendance policies, optimising timetabling, and harnessing technology, to minimise unproductive journeys.

Sectoral trends regarding student accommodation might be compounding growth in commuting. Whereas tuition fees are largely identical across the sector, there is no regulation over rents in student halls (Cowan and Boroumand, 2025). Rent inflation, geographical variation, and the advent of premium-priced student accommodation, may make commuting the only route into university for some learners from low-income backgrounds.

5. Optimising journeys between home and university

Live-at-home students inhabit a constant state of flux, moving between places (home, university) and roles (student, parent, carer, family member, employee) (Finn and Holton, 2019). The journey to university is an integral part of these learners' experience. Several studies present the commute as problematic (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2020), with negative implications for attendance, engagement, extra-curricular activity and - for

those travelling regionally - finances. Similar concerns were voiced by several participants; especially those under 21, who may have valued opportunities to engage more widely in university:

> *'Last year I wanted to join a society. They had regular meetups after 6pm or things like that So I was like, I wouldn't commute here for that. It would be quite inconvenient for me.'* (FG2, younger LC)

Despite being a key differentiator between commuters and residential peers, the act of travelling to university – sometimes over considerable distance – receives limited attention within policy and practice:

> *'I think the uni could do more to accommodate people who travel in.'* (FG1, younger LC)

One response is to change how journeys are perceived, recognising value in the commute. The journey is space where commuter students can adjust between life roles (Finn and Holton, 2019).

> *'I generally don't find the commute too bad to be fair, because I tend to get some work done on the train whilst I'm on the way and on the way back. So that when I get home, I can just switch off. Yeah, be a parent basically. Switch to mum mode.'* FG5, mature RC.

Commuting can also be a space for valuable learning However, lecturers have traditionally provided materials to be *read* (primarily journal articles/ texts) (Baker et al., 2019). Likewise, technological advances have seen many institutions adopt policies on 'lecture capture', obliging lecturers to provide footage of taught content for later *viewing*. Whilst not dismissing these formats, neither are as flexible as podcasts, which can be safely consumed whilst engaged in other tasks. Research into podcasts as part of medical training found that >90% of respondents listened to them whilst otherwise engaged (Thomas et al., 2020). The two most common concurrent activities – driving (72% of respondents) and exercising (40%) - suggest podcasts fit well with commuting. By adjusting institutional policy and practice,

universities can prioritise learning formats such as podcasts, which fit with how commuter students 'snatch' moments of time for study.

6. Understanding <u>how</u> students commute

Sometimes, travel to campus is discussed, primarily, in relation to institutions' *sustainability* practices. For example, Imperial College (London) describes 'climate-conscious travel', and University of Huddersfield promotes 'sustainable and active travel'. Commonly, the focus is on *staff* travel, with student behaviours more hidden. Travel and subsistence policies discourage some modes - particularly driving to campuses – in preference for public transport or walking (Keynon and Lindo, 2025). These judgements may, however, conflict with real-life travel choices commuter students face. For example, one participant was underwhelmed by the opportunity to save on bus fares:

> *'I know the University has a partnership with [names bus company], which is rubbish, I'm not gonna lie. It's like 20 pence per ticket reduction. 20 pence! So instead of £2 it's gonna be £1.80."* (FG3, younger LC)

This comment echoes limitations in *national* support around travel costs. In the UK, the 16-25 railcard provides discounted train travel. However, before 10am on weekdays – the window when many commuter students would travel for morning lecturers – discounts are effectively reduced, with a minimum fare payable. Meanwhile, as part of local transport reforms, Wales is the only UK nation seeking to explicitly recognise travel to HE institutions within the planning formula (Dickinson, 2025).

Eight of the 19 participants commuted regionally, usually employing multiple modes of transport, including cars, alongside trains. Notwithstanding environmental concerns, private car use may be most practical for some commuters (e.g. disabled students) (NUS, 2023). Additionally, accessing placements via public transport may be unrealistic in some locations, or at unsociable times (e.g. night shifts in health/ care settings). A small but meaningful proportion of students report car sharing (NUS, 2023). However, a 'taboo' around acknowledging student car use, within institutional policies, may limit such environmentally conscious approaches.

7. Validating home as a study environment

Until the pandemic, students' homes had been overlooked as settings for university study (Danvers and Wells, 2025). Discourse about 'home' focused on the 'semipermanent' movements between home and university, during which (younger) students cultivate independence (Holdsworth, 2009: 1852; Balloo et al., 2021). Students' interactions were largely seen as campus-based or occurring in communal accommodation (e.g. halls of residences, private rentals near campus) (Balloo et al., 2021). This characterisation does not reflect commuter students, for whom learning at home is fundamental to the university experience.

Home afforded participants a learning space that was controllable and free of distractions:

> *I don't like to spend much time in campus. I prefer studying at home. I'm a person that can study at home. I find it distracting seeing other people, noises, things disrupt me. So, I don't spend a lot of time on campus*. FG1, mature LC

Home countered 'overwhelming and busy' spaces on campus (FG4, younger RC). Conversely, several participants reported 'distractions' (FG4, younger RC) whilst working from home, including domestic phenomena (e.g. cleaning, doorbells). Participants sometimes found alternative places to study close to home (e.g. cafes):

> *'So, I generally kind of go out and about and find somewhere to go with my laptop.'* FG5, mature RC.

Whilst participants' emphasis on home was anticipated, this use of other spaces, proximal to home, rarely features in research or institutional awareness. Such behaviour was not restricted to regional commuters; those living locally sometimes studied off campus:

> *'If I am on campus and I want to do some work, we'll go to a [names a café local to campus] or just like somewhere different, that is like a bit away from uni.'* FG5, younger LC.

Whilst use of these 'third' spaces for study, may not impel institutions to revise existing provision of cafes and leisure space, this appears an opportune area for investigation, if institutions are to fully understand their learners' behaviours and experience.

Non-campus spaces are important, irrespective of residential status Amongst a general sample, Beckers et al. (2016) examined where undergraduates engaged in various learning activities. Students preferred to undertake independent activities (e.g. reading, assessment preparation) in quiet spaces with limited disruption (Beckers et al., 2016). Specific patterns emerged for level and gender. Females and second/third-years were more likely to study at home. Amongst important considerations, students listed privacy; the scope for controlling space; comfort; and the layout of spaces (Beckers et al., 2016). Similar factors were highlighted by current participants:

> *'I tend to be better at home in my own environment, because it's more peaceful and I'm more comfortable.'* FG1, mature LC.

Enhanced digital provision has facilitated participation in HE from home (Komljenovic et al., 2024). Whilst home-based behaviours are fundamental within *distance learning* (Selwyn, 2011), there has been little attention to their use in *campus-based* courses (Danvers and Wells, 2025). Whilst technological advances have empowered commuters to access independent learning activities (Turner et al., 2023), they report mixed experiences of interacting with peers in online space. Some commuters laud the utility of technology for connecting with peers from home, whilst others lament any consequential loss of face-to-face interactions (Hill et al., 2024; Turner et al., in review).

Positively, participants indicated that accessing space at home (and off campus) to support their learning was, overall, unproblematic. Nonetheless, some non-traditional students have described the space for quiet study at home as temporary, transitory, and determined by the needs of others (Danvers and Wells, 2025). Though universities cannot reconfigure home settings, they can exercise compassion and flexibility towards commuter students' circumstances.

Conclusion

This paper examined how commuter students navigate their university experiences. Findings indicate that policies and practices (at national and institutional level), currently overlook or misjudge commuter students' circumstances. Ultimately, commuters continue to report financial hardship and a sense of falling foul of expectations, regarding attendance and engagement. Some lecturers appear to harbour traditional – increasingly outdated – notions of student identify, which do not align with daily realities of those who commute.

Drawing on hooks' (2014) concept of engaged pedagogy, it is important that the sector recognises commuter students as whole individuals whose academic, social *and* emotional development are interconnected. hooks suggests that educators and policymakers move beyond surface-level inclusion, with its primary focus on academic matters, to centre the voices and experiences of marginalised learners. Applying her framework, national policies and institutional practice should deliberately create spaces where commuter students are not just accommodated but affirmed (hooks, 2014). Inclusion of commuters in the EORR (OfS, 2023) is an important step in mobilising stakeholders. Indeed, discourse around commuter students has increased nationally (Kenyon, 2025; Maslin, 2024; Kenyon & Lindo, 2025), with areas of innovative practice emerging (e.g. Preston, 2025; Yates & Moir, 2025) However, current findings suggest change needs to intensify, to ensure commuter students feel recognised and supported in fulfilling their potential; especially against a backdrop of growing commuter numbers.

Whilst this study captured experiences at one institution, we identified connections to national and institutional policies, which appear to exacerbated the marginalisation of this group. For example, national policies on attendance monitoring, student finance, and transport provision, are not ideally calibrated with commuters' needs. At institutional level, there is scope to strengthen practices that fit with commuter lifestyles (e.g. promoting podcasts).

Studying as a commuter is characterised by frequent movement between diverse spaces (physical and digital). Heightened recognition of the spaces valued by commuters may have

faded since the COVID-19 pandemic, as universities renew their focus on campus delivery (Danvers and Wells, 2025). Nonetheless, optimising the opportunities afforded by different spaces – including transit itself - is important for all learners, but commuters especially. Our participants provided novel space-related insights, including the impact of relocation during compulsory education; perceived distractions in communal student accommodation; the importance of home settings; the opportunity to use transit space to transfer between life roles; and the use of 'third' spaces, away from home or campus, for study. There is a clear imperative for institutions to take detailed interest in commuter students' use of spaces, and the utility of these spaces for learning and well-being. Importantly, the seven potential enhancement areas that we identified can stimulate conversations at all levels within institutions (e.g. from frontline lecturers to estates departments and senior management). Where this discourse is made visible to commuters, it can of itself enhance their sense of mattering to the institution (Hallem, 2023; Turner et al., 2024).

In responding to commuters' needs, it is important that institutions take an individualised approach, recognising local context. For example, in major conurbations , commuters can choose from multiple universities, accessible via public transport. In contrast, the study university sits in an area of limited public transport and digital infrastructure that is still being updated. Between disparate settings, there are likely to be substantial differences in expectations, experiences and, therefore, appropriate responses through policy and practice. Similarly, institutions need to identify their bespoke patterns of intersection between commuting and demographics, to inform effective policy and practice. Whilst mature learners represent a significant proportion of commuters, more under 21-year-olds are opting to commute (Ali, 2025). For a provider with particular growth in *young* commuters, well-intentioned responses (e.g. enhanced online access, flexible attendance policies) may meet mature commuters' needs but fail to address younger participants' desire for broader (extracurricular) university experiences (Brooks, 2008; Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022).

In summary, this study drew on students' voices to identify areas for potential enhancement of policy and practice, with the end goal of enhancing commuter students' experiences. Given the volume of commuters in contemporary UK HE, progress in this area can realise a significant positive shift in equity for the sector as a whole.

Disclosure statement

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