

Commuter student aspirations and outcomes: Why don't they add up?

Commuter students – who continue to live in the family home while they study – are students with high aspirations to achieve a good degree and secure a graduate job. But, commuter students have lower rates of continuation, academic achievement and graduate employment. This poses a significant challenge for higher education providers that have high numbers of commuter students, as poorer outcomes are detrimental to students, and have negative consequences for institutions.

Differential outcomes for commuter students may be explained in two ways: intersectional disadvantage (i.e. these students may be the first in family to enter HE, low income, mature, ethnic minority and in employment) and lower student engagement. Student characteristics and circumstances are difficult to change, but student engagement can be enhanced by changing student behaviour and/or changing the higher education offering in terms of organisation, pedagogy and culture.

Extensive qualitative research with students who commute finds that the process of commuting is challenging, and thus many students make strategic decisions about what to engage in. In general, they prioritise their academic engagement, but de-prioritise engagement in enrichment and enhancement activities, and social engagement including informal interaction with peers and teaching staff, and more formal participation in clubs, societies and sporting activities. These decisions however may be detrimental to the dual goals of academic achievement and graduate employment.

The majority of students were candid about prioritising formal academic engagement over informal interactions with academic staff, socialising with friends, participating in clubs and societies, and engaging in enrichment and enhancement activities. Indeed, many students framed this as an advantage of being a commuter to avoid being 'distracted' by peers and the excesses of a typical student lifestyle. This however runs the risk of throwing out the baby with the bath water, as these informal interactions and participation in wider opportunities offered through the higher education experience have multiple benefits.

Interaction with staff and friendships with other students are not just 'nice to have' extras, but rather it is through these connections that students gain valuable knowledge to help them be successful. For example, it is through discussion with peers that students 'figure out' what is required in assessment tasks, or they gain additional guidance through the informal conversations with at the end of taught sessions about independent learning tasks. Indeed, a significant amount of invaluable 'hot knowledge' is gleaned through these informal and untimetabled exchanges, in contrast to the formal 'cold' knowledge that is transmitted in official documentation and the formal delivery of the curriculum. Enhancement activities help to develop and provide evidence of graduates' attributes in a competitive employment market, and can be used to differentiate between applicants. Peers may offer hot knowledge to develop understanding of the value of these activities, but more importantly, peers can accompany each other and provide support when participating in enrichment activities – it's much more difficult to do it alone.

While many commuter students may lack cultural capital to recognise the value of engagement in the social and enhancement aspects of the higher experience, the solution to improve engagement and outcomes is not simply better information for would-be commuter students. Higher education providers also need to change. In particular, the organisation of the curriculum frequently ignores the very real challenges of commuting to study, spreading contact time and other opportunities across the week, having early and late finish times and not making effective use of the virtual learning environment and online communication tools. Such organisational changes are likely to require pedagogical changes too, for example towards a more active learning model and a greater emphasis on the 'flipped classroom'. Some institutions have been looking at other organisational changes to help develop a more 'sticky campus', from providing commuter students with spaces to heat up food and spend time, to offering more leisure activities during the day. But there is also the institutional culture to consider: the majority of staff view a residential HE experience akin to their own as the model to be emulated, and they lack understanding and feel exasperated that many contemporary students do not appear to aspire to this model. There needs to be greater appreciation of the complexity of lives that many students have, the commitment to their academic studies and the engagement that occurs outside of the institutional boundaries. Some students expressed frustration that as they were not seen on campus they were viewed as less committed students. The culture also needs to recognise the diversity and benefits commuter students offer, providing valuable links with local and regional communities.

In short, engaging commuter students needs a partnership approach, and is likely to involve learning and change by students, staff and institutions themselves. If we don't accept this challenge we run the risk of a two-tier HE system differentiating between those who have the economic, cultural and social capital to engage, and those who do not – and this will contribute further inequality and differential outcomes, and higher education will fail to deliver on the social mobility agenda despite increased participation by student groups who have traditionally been under-represented. And, if that is not enough, there will be negative consequences for teaching quality metrics and positions in the various league tables which will have a significant impact on higher education providers. It is therefore time to recognise this group of students to provide them with information and a voice; to make organisational, pedagogical and cultural changes – and to start recognising the opportunities local and regional students offer rather than ignoring them and hoping they will be able to adapt sufficiently to the cultural norms of our still largely traditional higher education provision.

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