

Commuter students in London: Pilot project

Qualitative perceptions of students about commuting and studying in London

Contents

1. Executive summary.....	2
2. Introduction	2
3. Research Design.....	3
4. Findings from the qualitative research with students.....	5
4.1 Students' experience of commuting to study in London.....	5
4.2 Ways in which commuting to study affected students' experiences.....	8
4.3 Links between commuting and student outcomes	11
4.4 Enhancing the experience of commuting to study in London.....	13
5. Conclusions, implications and recommendations.....	17
5.1 Conclusions.....	17
5.2 Implications.....	17
5.3 Recommendations for institutions.....	18
5.4 Recommendations for policy makers.....	18
6. Research tools appendix.....	19
6.1 Commuter student group discussion guide.....	19
6.2 Information and consent forms for research participants	22
6.3 Background information survey.....	24
6.4 Commuter student experience handout	27
6.5 Presentation.....	27
7. References.....	28
Contact details:.....	29

1. Executive summary

This report provides an overview of the findings from qualitative research with commuter students in London. It discusses students' experiences of commuting to study in London, the ways in which commuting impacts on their engagement with the student experience and outcomes, and suggestions about how to enhance the commuter student experience.

The findings reflect qualitative research conducted across England (Thomas and Jones 2017) with respect to many of the practical challenges associated with commuting study, and the prioritising of engagement in academic activities, and lower priority given to engagement in enhancement and support activities and minimal engagement in social activities with higher education (HE) peers. More students however framed commuting positively, valuing a separation between home and studying, and avoiding being distracted by peers, thus studying could be viewed more like employment by commuter students and thus the commute contributes to maintaining a work-life balance. Indeed, the issues of disability and mental well-being were discussed openly by students and warrant further investigation.

The study extends understanding further about the relationship between commuting and student outcomes, with students striving for a good degree outcome and progression into graduate employment, but not valuing wider engagement in the student experience. The study also contributes insights into the ways in which institutions can address the challenges encountered by commuter students. The report concludes with a series of recommendations for HE and HE policy makers.

2. Introduction

Previous research and commentaries has drawn attention to the experiences of commuter students (e.g. Donnelly and Gamsu 2018, Lightfoot 2018, Mannerings 2018, Maguire and Morris 2018, Neves and Hillman 2018, Thomas and Jones 2017). This is fuelled by the growing number of students choose to stay in the family home to reduce some of the direct costs of participating in HE, and the intersectionality of 'commuting' with other diversity characteristics. Furthermore, students who commute have poorer outcomes than students who live in more traditional student accommodation (see section 4.3 of this report). Research on student success identifies the importance of engagement in higher education contributing to outcomes (e.g. Thomas 2012, Mountford-Zimdars et al 2015), and commuter students have lower levels of engagement, thus, understanding – and improving – engagement is paramount. London HE providers experience particular challenges with regards to students commuting due to their socio-economic geography. Frequently students are located in London, but do live at or close to their place of study, and the availability of space in London institutions limits possibilities to create opportunities for engagement on campus outside of the academic experience. The growing body of evidence suggests that either HE providers will need to find ways to create 'sticky' campuses to accommodate commuter students, or they will need to find alternative approaches to promote engagement in the wider student experience, using for example technology and

facilitating and drawing on engagement with peers and communities in the places that commuter students live.

3. Research Design

Perceptions of commuter students were gathered through workshops held at participating HE institutions, and facilitated by trained student-peer-researchers. Five higher education providers based in London opted to participate in the qualitative strand of the study.

Each institution recruited a student-peer-researcher, who met together for training and to develop the workshop activities. The training day involved reflecting on student-peer-researchers' experiences of commuting and studying in London, developing questions, prompts and activities to engage student participants in sharing their experience, ensuring the study was undertaken ethically, and practising group interview skills.

Students participating in the research were recruited by the student-peer-researchers in partnership with a staff sponsor. Information about the study was disseminated electronically, and some peer-researchers went into lectures to encourage students to participate. The aim was to run three workshops in each institution, but it proved difficult to recruit sufficient participants. This is likely to reflect the nature of commuter students who tend to limit their time on campus to when they are involved in academic activities (Thomas and Jones 2017), the mode of research (groups rather than individual meetings tailored to suit students' availability) and the fact that students were not incentivized to participate in all but one institution. In total 14 workshops were held and 38 students participated.

A presentation was prepared to structure the workshop, to support the facilitators and to contribute to consistency (see appendix 6.5). On arrival, each participating student was asked to read the ethical information and sign to consent to participate (appendix 6.2), and then to complete a background survey to provide some demographic information (appendix 6.3) – as well as to have refreshments and make a name badge. The student-peer-researchers introduced everyone, and provided background information about the research study. The student-peer-researchers wanted to include ground rules for the workshop; while they would have liked to have developed them with the participants, due to the limited time available, it was decided to develop a set and invite people to add any additions if appropriate (these can be viewed as part of appendix 6.1).

A worksheet was developed to help students think about commuting and engagement, and some student-peer-researchers used these to encourage students to jot down their experiences to help them contribute to the discussion (appendix 6.4). Four key topics were identified (see appendix 6.1), and a set of prompts created, which were displayed on the screen. The topics were:

1. Being a commuter: What is your experience of commuting to study in London?

The following prompts were offered:

- What is good and what is challenging about commuting?
- How does commuting make you feel?
- Did you choose to commute, and if so why?
- Would you change anything about your university, living arrangements and travel arrangements if you were to plan your higher education study again?

2. Your student experience: To what extent has commuting to study affected, either positively or negatively, your student experience?

Participants were encouraged to think about:

- Attendance at lectures, seminars, labs etc.
- Group work, studying with peers, using the library
- Involvement in extra-curricular activities e.g. societies, volunteering, rep.
- Making and going out with friends

2. Your outcomes: To what extent, if any, do you think commuting is likely to impact on what you gain from higher education?

Participants were encouraged to think about:

- Reasons for coming to university
- Positive or negative impact of commuting on achieving these goals
- Expectations of HE compared to your experience
- Likelihood of completing the course, getting a good degree, getting a graduate job, going onto postgraduate study

3. Enhancing the experience of commuting to study in London: What does or could your university do to improve the experience and outcomes of students who commute to study?

Participants were asked to:

- Write their answers on post-it notes. Use different colours for what is already being done and what could be done.
- Consider to what extent should the emphasis be on providing information to students or on changing the way the university is organised and delivers the student experience.
- Things to think about:
 - Curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment
 - Extra-curricular opportunities
 - Making friends and feeling like you belong
 - Well-being and health issues

90 minutes was allowed for each session. Sessions were recorded where permission was gained from participants, and facilitators made notes. Following each session, the findings were written up using a template, which also asked student-peer-researchers to reflect on how the session went, and how it compared with other sessions they had facilitated.

4. Findings from the qualitative research with students

The majority of students commute in London, as very few London-based higher education providers have accommodation adjacent to their primary teaching space on campus. Thus, even students who have moved away from home, including international students can have a substantial commute between their term time accommodation and their main place of study.

Thirty-eight students participated in the workshops and discussions about commuting. All of the students defined themselves as commuters, although the commutes varied in duration from approximately ten minutes, to around about two hours each way. The majority used public transport to commute, but some walked as it was more relaxing than public transport, others drove as it gave them greater flexibility and could be more affordable in the longer run, although parking was not available to all of our participants. One student commuted via his mobility scooter for 40 minutes each way.

4.1 Students' experience of commuting to study in London

The decision to commute to study

This section discusses students' decisions to remain in the family home, or to live further away from their place of study, rather than to relocate themselves close to their university campus and/or with other students in halls of residences or similar. The students fell into two groups: those who preferred to live away from the university – the choosers, and those who faced constraints that required them to live further away from their site of study – the constrained.

Students who have chosen to commute cited personal and cultural reasons, or preferring their own 'spaces'. For example, students liked continuing to live with families or in their own homes, as this offered familiarity, support and enabled them to avoid the student drinking culture and more 'chaotic' student lifestyle. Families were framed positively by research participants as providing emotional and psychological support, but they might equally have been seen as more negatively, as perhaps wishing to limit their children's participation in certain aspects of student life. Some students (particularly at one particular university) chose to rent private sector accommodation further away from the university. Their reasons included cheaper rent in more distant neighbourhoods and/or being able to afford a larger living space; being closer to family, friends and part-time employment; and choosing areas with more entertainment than surrounding the university.

Other participants identified constraints which resulted in them remaining in their home, or relocating but not too closely to the university, and commuting. The most frequently cited

constraints were housing-related, having responsibilities to a partner and/or family, cost-related considerations, and disability issues. Students with partners and/or children did not consider moving away from the family home and closer to the university; these, and other students did not wish to change their current housing arrangements. For example, one student living in social housing with her young son did not feel that she could contemplate living closer to the university as she would lose her home. Another student had inherited his parents' house with his sister, and so re-locating was not considered as an option.

A few students felt they did not have a choice for other reasons. For example, an international student explained that he was unable to find private sector accommodation, so he had to live with relatives and commute. Three students identified disability and well-being issues as influencing their decision to continue their existing living arrangement and commute longer distances to study.

Several students at different universities cited cost as a factor contributing to their decisions to commute. For example, one group of students said it was much cheaper to commute than to move nearer to the university. Similarly, students at another university chose to rent private sector accommodation further away from the campus as it was better value for money (and offered other benefits noted above). Other students felt that it was most cost effective to commute, or that they could not justify the greater costs of moving away.

Benefits of commuting

A key advantage of commuting that was identified by the research participants was not being distracted from their academic studies by friends, this allowed them to use independent study time productively, either at home or in the library. Some students made a conscious effort to use the commuting time productively, for example reading books and watching videos, one student cites this as a positive advantage. Students at one university reported making friends through the process of commuting, which they valued. Other advantages included being more active (e.g. by walking), separation between studying and relaxing and being more focused on academic work when on campus as they have fewer other distractions. For some groups of students the benefits of commuting outweighed the negative issues.

Commuting challenges

While students had in most cases had some autonomy over the decision to commute, they had not always appreciated the stresses and strains, and practical challenges of commuting to study when making their decisions. In particular, many students did not expect to be required to be on campus as much as they were. For example, one student who had attended the first two years of her programme at a partner college, was surprised to subsequently be required to be on campus four days per week. Several students at one university had changed modules to reduce the number of days they needed to travel to campus, while other explained how they had made strategic choices about what they attended to reduce the number of days on campus and to avoid travelling at peak times to save costs and reduce stress.

S also has to incur extra cost when commuting at peak times. She supports the other participants with their assertions of the packed trains and the negative effects it has on her commuting experience. She keeps her transport cost low by attending a reduced number of modules. This allows her to reduce the number of times she travels to university. She also makes further savings by travelling during the off-peak period, and in addition, the trains are less-packed (sic) and it is more peaceful.

Students identified challenges associated with the commute itself; the services on campus in general and the lack of facilities for commuters; engagement in the academic experience; participation in other activities on campus and lack of information about how much time they would need to spend on campus before entering HE. Several students drew attention to the adverse effect of commuting on their mental health.

Travelling, especially at peak times, is exhausting, stressful and can make you feel unwell; some students described complex journeys with multiple changes (sometimes undertaken to save money). Commuting at peak times is also more expensive, and again this had not always been anticipated, having said this most students found the costs of commuting acceptable, especially in comparison to the costs they would incur if they moved into student accommodation or similar.

The majority of students felt that a long commute either by public transport or on congested roads resulted in fatigue, so that once on campus they found it difficult to concentrate and engage in academic and wider activities. Similar, students talked about the practical challenges associated with carrying things around all day, including coats and equipment as institutions do not have lockers or safe places where things can be stored. One student had requested accommodation on campus was not eligible as he lived less than ten miles away, but his daily commute often took up to four hours in total.

It takes **D** two hours to commute each way to the [university campus], as his home is not well-connected to transport links. He has to catch a bus, the underground and the Docklands Light Railway. The cost is reasonable, £6.50, but it frequently takes a total of four hours for the return journey. The University has accommodation available on campus, but there are eligibility criteria, including living more than ten miles away from the campus. D has explained his situation, but he has not been able to rent accommodation on campus. The main issue is his current term time address lacks efficient transport links and this increases delays and costs to travelling and any chance of his experience being far from pleasurable.

Another student talked about having to use public transport due to lack of parking, and wanting to avoid a parking fine; students at one institution commented on the inequity of having no student parking on one campus, with facilities being available at another campus. It should be noted that for some students driving can be cost effective option.

Some students with disabilities experience limitations on their travel options, for example one student with a disability described only being able to get a specific bus. Students at

several institutions talked about stress and anxiety being caused or exacerbated by travelling at peak times.

Students did express there is a certain amount of stress, two students have mobility issues and getting to and from the University takes more of a toll for these students. One student is only able to get on a specific coach due to her mobility issues and therefore must miss certain classes and is late to classes because of the amount of time it takes to get to the University. The other students that have shorter commutes stated mild stress but try to use this 'dead' time to do something productive even if it is reading a book etc.

Students described leaving home early to try to avoid some of the travel challenges, and so arriving on campus hungry. Either due to lack of time, or cost or both, students went straight to lectures hungry, fuelling their lack of concentration and engagement. Indeed, across the participating institutions there was concern about the cost and variety of food available, and in some cases a lack of food for students with dietary needs such as being lactose intolerant. Similarly, after a long day, and tiring journey home, students don't always feel like returning to their studying in the evening.

4.2 Ways in which commuting to study affected students' experiences

Academic engagement

Students in this study, as with previous qualitative research (Thomas and Jones 2017), viewed themselves as having good academic engagement. Some students however were concerned that although they are hardworking this is not recognised by teaching staff as they do not see them around campus as often as other students. On reflection students identified that commuting can however impact on academic engagement, causing delays resulting in missing taught sessions, having to leave quickly at the end of sessions to travel home, participating in group work, and influencing the times they access the library. This results in strategic decisions about engagement to minimise costs and time spent travelling and maximise academic study benefits.

M arrives at most lectures late and tired. The delays to her commute can be blamed for this. She misses out on the bulk of the lecture and has often neglected to have breakfast just to beat the traffic. Eating at the university is not an option because the travel expenses have drained her financial resources. Maintaining a work-life balance means she cannot stay longer on campus to engage in any extracurricular activities. She socialises with friends when on site and relates with most of them via social media platforms like WhatsApp.

Students talked about travel delays as the norm, especially when using public transport. This resulted in students feeling embarrassed at having to enter lectures late; several students reported arriving late and opting not to enter the lecture. Some students indicated that they chose not to attend lectures and other sessions that required them to travel at peak times. Some students were surprised by the amount of time they are expected to be on campus.

E had initially made an informed choice to live in the family home in the previous year (in North London) but found it challenging and moved 15 minutes away from campus the following year. He explained the disadvantages of commuting from North London: late to lectures and thereby do not enter lectures late (unless otherwise spoken to a specific lecturer); exhaustion from commuting and finding it difficult to focus on work upon arriving at home; arriving hungry to University and going straight to lectures; financially costly; leaving social events early to travel home. However, he also explained that if it was possible to live in the family home, he would due to food and expenses.

The academic experience is potentially affected in other ways too, in particular students talked about having to rush off before or immediately at the end of taught sessions to make transport connections, the reasons for this included work commitments, needing to fulfil family obligations, and to avoid travelling in the dark. This could mean that they missed out on important information at the end of sessions and they did not have the opportunity to stay after class and chat with friends or lecturers.

Some students explained how organising group work could be difficult; at one institution students asked to be allowed to work individually to reduce the stress of trying to work with students who have greater accessibility to campus. At another institution group work is seen as less problematic as it can often be done online; if face-to-face meetings are required they negotiate a suitable time, and the majority of students are understanding of the challenges.

Participants found group work challenging and explained that they had previously asked lecturers to do group projects on their own as it was too stressful organising students who had greater accessibility to the campus.

Several students did however talk about travelling to the library at the weekend to study; weekend travel is cheaper and less stressful. Other students talked about leaving home very early to avoid some of the travel inconvenience, and then studying in the library; at one institution the library does not open until 9am, so students use the facilities of other universities, but clearly this impacts on their access to specialist materials. Thus commuting students appear to be making strategic choices about when and how frequently to commute, and what to engage in, and what to miss.

B agrees that there is a benefit to living close to the university, and that his engagement would be better if he did not need to commute. He has changed modules to allow him to attend only two days per week, and he keeps his travel costs down by only attending scheduled classes. If he did not have to commute more time can be spent reading and using the learning facilities.

It should also be recognised that commuting students are not only having to commute, but they are often juggling other responsibilities too, such as being carers and have employment commitments.

S benefits from driving because this allows him to start his journey early to avoid any traffic jams. This requires him to wake up early. The resulting effect is tiredness and a lack of

engagement with the activities. He is also caring for his mother and this exerts extra pressure on him. His academic work is a lot and he has no spare time or energy to devote to other activities on campus.

Engagement in enhancement and support activities

In the same way that students do not hang about on campus at the end of their taught sessions, equally they tend not to participate in enhancement, support or social activities on campus, finding it more convenient to do these activities nearer to where they live. In particular, students explained that they are tired having commuted to the campus (and many still have a long commute home), they would have to carry specialist clothing and equipment around with them all day, and they might experience difficulties or safety issues travelling home later in the evening. It was noted that it is difficult to be involved in extra-curricular activities due to these practical considerations, especially when they take place elsewhere within the institution, making the travel arrangements more complex.

One student, who describes herself as neuro-diverse (she is autistic) finds that commuting is stressful, and so leaves her without sufficient 'energy and focus' to participate in extra-curricular activities and preserve her health and wellbeing.

In general, students who lived closer to the institution experienced fewer barriers to participation, while those living further away preferred to engage in activities nearer to home. Some students took responsibility for their choices, either actively engaging themselves in activities, or accepting that they made that choice – but they do not think it will have a negative impact.

M will only attend timetabled academic events at the university and this is due to the complications from commuting. However, exceptions are made for attending extracurricular sessions that feature guest speakers. She believes that attending these events is beneficial to her academic pursuit. She does not socialise on campus and only comes here to study. The walk to campus leaves her happy and energised. She confesses to not being a part of any society because she struggles to find a place in which to fit.

It should be noted that the students involved in workshop discussions seemed to make good use of the support services available on campus.

Social engagement

Similarly, students had mixed experiences with regards to socialising and participating in both formal and informal social activities based within their universities. In particular, travelling made it difficult, and often they lacked energy to spend more time on campus. Some students however described how they made efforts to meet peers, for example during lunchtime but generally their social life takes place elsewhere 'the other side of London'. Some students explained that they booked train tickets in advance to save money, so this resulted in a lack of spontaneity to be able to socialise in unplanned activities. Students who lived closer to their university tended to find it easier to get involved socially, while the majority of students have very limited or no involvement in formal social activities, and those who have decided to participate, often have to leave social events early in order to get home

in time. The cost of childcare was also mentioned as a barrier to participation in both enhancement activities and socialising on campus.

Students in one workshop concluded that they felt left out as much of the social activity is connected to halls of residences, and tends to start quite late, so is not designed with commuters in mind. This view is echoed by a student at another university who says that students who live in campus accommodation develop close-knit relationships, which makes them more independent, and gives them a network of peers to socialise with. Indeed, another student at the same university believes that students who live on campus are targeted with promotional material for social engagements, while those who live off campus are unaware of these events.

Some students expressed an expectation that they would be able to make friends with other commuters; this would give them company whilst travelling and potentially offer other opportunities such as studying and socialising together. While this happened at one university (that provides a bus service), this did not happen for students from another university.

One student had been involved in societies but less so now. Socialising was difficult and sometimes the lack of energy to socialise or the long journey home late would prevent the students from becoming involved. Another participant is involved in social events and the Acapella society, but this has happened since he moved closer to the university. This participant made it evident that he did not expect commuting to be so challenging and would have liked some information regarding its challenges before attending University.

4.3 Links between commuting and student outcomes

Commuter student experience and outcomes

Evidence from a range of external sources suggests that commuter students have poorer outcomes than non-commuter student (Maguire and Morris 2018). This includes engagement and belonging (Thomas et al 2017), continuation (Social Market Foundation, 2017), attainment (Neves and Hillman 2018, Dante, Fabris and Palese 2013), and graduate employment (Artess et al 2014). Indeed, Neves and Hillman (2018) conclude that students who live further away and/or live at home perceive lower value for money and would be less likely to choose the same course and institution again (p28).

Students' perceptions of the impact of commuting on their outcomes

While there is evidence that commuter students have a less good experience and outcomes than non-commuter students, most of the commuter students we spoke to did not think commuting would have a negative impact on their outcomes, and some felt it was largely positive. While our study found that in general students did not think being a commuter would impact on their outcomes, this broad conclusion was tempered by some reflections, prompted by the questions posed in the workshops.

For example, some students did worry that not attending certain lectures and other taught sessions might have a detrimental effect on their attainment; but they felt this was counterbalanced by the value of not being distracted and unable to study in halls of residence. Some students at another university felt that the stress and strain of travelling affects their concentration, and this is likely to impact on their attainment. Plus, students recognised that having to leave lectures early meant they missed feedback on assessed work, and did not have time to talk to staff and other students at the end of sessions.

Students at one university said they had come to university to get a good degree, and to 'figure out' the kind of career they wanted. These students felt commuting had prepared them well for employment. A couple of students in one workshop felt that they might not be recognised as conscientious as they were not seen on campus, and this might feed into a reference, and thus their graduate prospects.

Students said that their main goal to be achieved by attending university was to achieve a good degree, which will then enable them to get a better job. Students also came to university to figure out what they wanted to do as a career. Indeed, the students stated that commuting has prepared them for working life. Overall students felt that commuting would not affect their outcome since the majority of students live within 30 minutes of the university they felt that this is a somewhat reasonable amount of time to be travelling to one campus 3 times a week and believe there is no impact on final grades. However, students did express leaving 10 mins earlier or even right after lecture or seminars end will have some amount of impact on the quality of coursework as this is the main time the lecturer would give feedback and speak generally about the coursework. In another group some students expressed some concern that choosing not to commute to the library and certain seminars or lectures may negatively affect the final grade for the students. On the other hand, students expressed they were glad they were not living in halls as friends had complained about the constant noise and believed they were able to study better at home which can positively affect the final grade for students.

Despite the belief that commuting had not had a negative impact, students did recognise that they had expected to be close to campus, or that commuting was more difficult than they had expected. For example, students at one university reported that they had expected to live closer to campus and to have a more engaging student life, however, for financial and practical reasons, they had not been able to have this. At another university mature students in particular felt that the student experience did not live up to their expectations. Indeed, a couple of students at this university felt that commuting had a negative impact on their experience, making them either less likely to pursue postgraduate study, and a student at third university said that their experience of commuting would encourage them to consider living closer to campus for postgraduate study to maximise their engagement and success.

D does not intend to pursue a post-graduate degree because he has not enjoyed the student commuter experience. The time and money spent on commuting impacts greatly on

his ability to get involved with the university when it hosts guest speaking sessions and other extra-curricular activities. He is achieving good grades but he admits to not enjoying the student experience due to the difficulties faced with his commute. He feels trapped.

4.4 Enhancing the experience of commuting to study in London

Across the participating institutions there are examples of good practice that others could learn from, and issues that students raised that they would like to see addressed in their institutions. Given the range of practice identified a list of suggestions is provided below, but it should be recognised that some of these interventions and approaches are offered by some institutions, and should be considered by others.

1. **Pre-entry information about commuting.** Provision of simple clear information to students about living off campus and commuting, to inform decision making. This needs to include travel information, details of expectations about time on campus for teaching and other expectations.

The University does not provide clear information to students about commuting. **K** would welcome simple and clear information that would state the ways available to students to commute to university in an affordable way. Although this information seems clear for most Londoners, it is not so to newcomers who learn about the different costs – peak and off-peak – as they go, since their information is not provided beforehand.

2. **Bus services.** A number of universities offer bus services from commuter hot spots and from transport hubs, and between campuses. These services are highly valued by students, but the number of stops and the frequency of services should be reviewed to reduce overcrowding and better meet students' needs. Timetable and other information should be very accessible to students, and be included in the pre-entry information.

Make transportation easier (e.g. more buses – students have to wait on average 15 minutes for buses and they are always crowded).

M suggested that the shuttle bus should operate from [additional location] due to the congestion and cancellations encountered on student journeys.

3. **Food on campus.** There should be a good variety of food available, including catering for various dietary needs and low cost rather than commercial food outlets.

B suggested the university adopt more student commuter friendly lecture start times. Not having to commute in the rush hour improves the commuter experience. There should be a robust selection of food options on site. No longer should students have to travel off-site to eat and incur additional travel costs.

4. **Online resources.** These can include recorded lectures, but also other materials to support students to learn flexibly.

There was a consensus that the university is really good with online resources provided to students, in particular Panopto, which is an online tool that records lectures and uploads them to the Moodle page. Students also felt that the lecturers are good with giving their time outside of hours spent on lectures and seminars, to ask any questions or any clarifications needed.

5. **Lecture capture.** Students value being able to catch up on and review lectures online. At some institutions this is standard practice, while at other institutions it is not universal. A policy of making all lectures available would assist commuter students to access taught sessions.
6. **Flexible employment on campus.** One university offers flexible working hours for paid jobs on campus, which commuter students value, as it connects them to the campus, but fits in with their commute and other commitments.
7. **Study spaces.** Good access to study space (quiet rooms, library, classrooms) is valued by students where available, and should be considered in all institutions. Students at another university suggested that they should be allowed to rest and sleep in the library. While students at a third university struggled with the opening times of the library which does not accommodate early arrivals trying to beat the traffic (i.e. it opens at 9am).
8. **24 hour opening.** A number of learning facilities such as libraries and labs have extended opening hour which is useful to some students (e.g. labs open until 9pm on weekends and 24 hour library access).
9. **Lockers.** The provision of lockers is viewed as a practical solution to the challenge of carrying possessions around campus. While some institutions have provided lockers, there are still not enough, and some institutions do not have any.
10. **Timetabling.** Timetabling should take account of commuter students, aiming to consolidate time on campus and avoid large gaps and single sessions on campus. Ideally organising the taught sessions to avoid the need to travel to campus every day. Avoiding peak travel was recommended by students in some of the focus groups as a key improvement, as travel is more likely to be delayed at peak times, and it is more expensive. Similarly, timetabling should avoid starting exams early, again to avoid peak time travel and associated delays.
11. **Institutional culture.** Some students felt that the institutional culture was not understanding of commuter students' rationale for commuting and thus not accommodating of their needs. For example, staff understanding could be developed about the reasons why students commute, including cultural and religious reasons, as

well as economic ones, and personal circumstances and preferences. Similarly, staff should recognise that commuters are often conscientious students, and arriving late is not an indication of lack of effort and commitment, but the result of unavoidable travel delays, and many are in fact, committed and studious students.

During the discussion, the group touched on the issues surrounding the attitude toward commuters. They complained about the lack of civility and courtesy towards them by staff. **S** expressed the need for some lecturers to be more respectful and stop treating students like children.

12. **Accessible support.** Support services should be developed with commuter students in mind, and be promoted widely to ensure all students are aware of what is available, in particular greater use could be made of plasma display screens across the universities. It was noted that the personal tutoring system is useful for students to voice concerns, but this needs to be accessible (i.e. on days commuter students are likely to be on campus).
13. **Communication.** Improved communication should make use of texts and social media to reach students off campus and while travelling. Students should be able to opt in and out of communication channels.

B urges the university to improve communication with its student body. This will enable the easy resolution of matters affecting the students and distracting them from studying

14. **Improving opportunities to drive to campus.** Driving offers a cheaper, more flexible and safer options for some students; this could be facilitated by providing more car parking, and organising carpooling via social media.
15. **Bicycles.** Students at one university welcomed the free bike hire initiative, that allows staff and students to access a bicycle on a daily or weekly basis for free. A similar approach could be adopted at other universities.
16. **Commuter student forum or network.** The student-peer-researchers commented that students had enjoyed the opportunity to discuss commuting, especially identifying strengths and further ways in which the university could develop.

Students were really engaged when given the opportunity to voice concerns and things that could be done differently by the University.

17. **Lap tops.** Making laptops available to borrow enables students to avoid carrying lap tops. There needs to be a sufficient number or a booking system to ensure students will have access, and they need to be of a sufficient quality (especially speed) to make them useful.

Better and faster computers and laptops – most of them bring their own laptops and tablets every time they come in as the ones available at [name of university] are too slow

to login and many times they do assignments in between classes and there's not enough time.

18. **Access to lectures.** Allow students who are delayed travelling into lectures late. At one university there is a '10-minute' rule, and this should be extended for commuter students.

"10 minutes rule" – lecturers have the 10 minutes rule when late students can come up until 10 minutes the class has started. The rule doesn't take into consideration the delays and problems on public transportation, so one suggestion would be to extend that time or to allow commuter students to come in later (i.e. more than 10 minutes late).

19. **Sport and leisure facilities on campus.** Students at one university valued some of the initiatives to encourage them to stay on campus, for example the real tennis was mentioned. But they would value other services such as (cheaper) gym membership to enable them to use time on campus for leisure activities. At another university students suggested making better use of the Students' Union spaces for leisure activities.

20. **Kitchen facilities.** A number of institutions have provided kitchen facilities including kettles, water coolers and microwaves. These are valued by commuter students and should be widely available.

21. **Relaxation space.** Commuter students needs space to relax and sleep while on campus.

The security guards are required to wake up any student caught sleeping in the library, this does not take into account the fatigue caused by the arduous commute. The university needs to relax this policy.

22. **Free printing and copying.** These services encourage students to stay on campus and use the university facilities.

23. **Flexible accommodation for commuters.** One university provides flexible accommodation that can be booked by the night.

24. **Cheaper accommodation on or near campus.** Subsidised accommodation nearer to campus would benefits commuters who would prefer not to commute but are unable to do so because of the cost.

Provide cheaper and quality accommodation near the university as the rent prices around the area are high and have been increasing recently.

Institutions could consider the concept of a 'sticky campus' to consider how students can be encouraged and facilitated to spend more time on campus, but equally it should be

recognised that students have positive links into the communities the universities serve, and perhaps more use of these relationships should be made too. This is something to be developed through further research.

5. Conclusions, implications and recommendations

5.1 Conclusions

This study has identified many of the same issues regarding the experience of commuter students uncovered in earlier research, however more students framed commuting positively, valuing a separation between home and studying, and avoiding being distracted by peers. Students in this study often viewed studying more like employment, striving to maintain a work-life balance, and preparing them for graduate employment. Furthermore, the issues of disability and mental well-being were discussed openly by students and could be explored further. The study extends understanding about the relationship between commuting and student outcomes, with students striving for a good degree outcome and progression into graduate employment, but not valuing wider engagement in the student experience. The study also contributes insights into the ways in which institutions can address the challenges encountered by commuter students, with a series of practical suggestions from the students themselves.

5.2 Implications

The experience of commuting itself is tiring and frequently stressful as a consequence of the delays. This is particularly concerning in relation to mental health and wellbeing. Anything that can be done to reduce the strain of travelling, particularly during peak times, would be beneficial.

Students are broadly content with their decisions to commute, but some are deeply unhappy. Students do need to have access to information to inform their choice to commute, and they should be prompted to examine it carefully in relation to their expectations of student life.

Many commuter students regard themselves as committed and conscientious students, but they feel that they are not always regarded this way by their institution's organisation and staff attitudes. The timetabling of taught sessions and assessments is often not sympathetic to the experience of commuter students; they lack a place to spend time, eat and store things on campus; and they feel uncomfortable about being unavoidably late on occasions.

Students do not expect commuting to have a negative impact on their outcomes (continuation, attainment and progression to employment). On reflection however they have identified ways in which commuting could impact on their attainment and progression in particular. It is likely that there are implications that students themselves are unaware of, such as the value of peer learning and studying collaboratively, and the contribution of extra curricular activities to employment prospects. These implications need to be further

explored in relation to both personal and institutional outcomes, for example in relation to the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework.

Students were appreciative of the steps their institutions have taken to enhance their experience, but they valued the opportunity to reflect on improvements, and a good list of ideas has been generated. This should be helpful for institutions in London and beyond that are looking to improve the experience – and outcomes - of commuter students.

5.3 Recommendations for institutions

- i. Provide students with detailed information to inform living and commuting decisions.
- ii. Develop a commuter-friendly curriculum, even if this is for a limited range of programmes or modules.
- iii. Develop staff understanding about the rationale and experiences of commuter students.
- iv. Improve students' understanding of the benefits of engagement in the wider student experience.
- v. Provide opportunities in 'commuter hot spots' for students to meet each other to socialise, study and engage in extra-curricular activities.
- vi. Ensure commuter students are not unintentionally excluded from communications.
- vii. Consider what facilities and services are available for commuter students on campus.
- viii. Provide opportunities for commuter students to contribute to the institution's approach to engaging commuter students.
- ix. Build positive links through commuter students with the areas in which they live.

5.4 Recommendations for policy makers

- i. Work towards a common definition and measure of commuter students for the sector.
- ii. Encourage institutions to support commuter students through their Access and Participation Plans and the Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework.
- iii. Build commuter students into benchmarking for outcome indicators, and student experience and satisfaction data.
- iv. Develop a commuter student charter or set of standards all institutions should aspire to.

6. Appendix for Research tools

6.1 Commuter student group discussion guide

This is the discussion guide used by student-peer-researchers to facilitate the workshops with students. A presentation was used to display the topics and questions onto a large screen to facilitate and support the engagement of all students in the discussion. A template was also used to stimulate thinking to help everyone contribute their views.

Resources

You will need the following resources to run the commuter student discussion group:

- Powerpoint presentation
- Data projector and laptop
- Consent forms
- Background surveys
- Commuter student handout
- 2 colours of post-it notes or similar
- Pens
- Labels for name badges
- Refreshments
- Paper and pen to write notes
- Digital recorder or phone to record the discussion

Arrival

Arrive at least 15 minutes before the start time to set up. When students arrive welcome them and ask them to:

- Help themselves to refreshments.
- Make a name badge.
- Complete the background survey (if they have not done so already)
- Read the ethical information and sign the consent form.
- Ask any questions.

Introductions (5 mins)

- Get everyone to introduce themselves quickly
- Explain the purpose of the research: to explore students' experiences of commuting to study in higher education and ways in which it could be improved.
- Briefly explain your role as student-peer-researcher.

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Commuter students in London

- Briefly explain that the session is 90 minutes during which time you will be asking them to think, talk and write about commuting to study at a university or college in London.

Ground rules (5 mins)

Share the ground rules – which you can add to or amend. Put them on the screen, give people a moment to read them, and then ask if everyone is happy with them.

1. Respect the confidentiality of everyone, and do not repeat things outside of this room.
2. Respect the views of everyone in the room.
3. Avoid bad or offensive language.
4. Turn off mobile phones.
5. Don't talk over people.
6. Give everyone a chance to speak and develop their ideas, especially those who are quieter.
7. No secondary conversations.
8. Don't use phones, tablets, laptops, etc. during the conversation.
9. Stay focused on the topics being discussed.
10. Please be honest and share as much as you feel comfortable with.

Getting started (10 mins)

Ask people to spend a few minutes thinking about commuting to study and write or draw on the handout. Please ask people to include their name as this will enable us to match up with background survey and consent form.

Topic 1: Being a commuter (15 mins)

Overarching question:

- **What is your experience of commuting to study in London?**

Prompt questions you can use if people don't have much to say:

- What is good and what is challenging about commuting?
- How does commuting make you feel?
- Did you choose to commute, and if so why?
- Would you change anything about your university, living arrangements and travel arrangements if you were to plan your higher education study again?

Topic 2: Your student experience (15 mins)

Overarching question:

- **To what extent has commuting to study affected, either positively or negatively, your student experience?**

Prompt questions:

- Do you attend all your timetabled academic sessions?
- How involved are you group work?
- Do you study with peers?
- How do you use the library and other campus services?
- What extra-curricular activities do you participate in?
- How have you made friends at uni?
- In what ways has your student experience been different to your expectations?

Topic 3: Your outcomes (10 mins)

Overarching question:

- **To what extent, if any, do you think commuting is likely to impact on what you gain from higher education?**

Prompt questions:

- Why did you decide to go to university? What do you want to achieve?
- In what ways will commuting have a positive or negative impact on achieving these goals?
- How do your expectations of HE compare to your experience?
- How would you rate your likelihood of completing the course, getting a good degree, getting a graduate job, going onto postgraduate study?

Topic 4: Enhancing the experience of commuting to study in London (20 mins)

Overarching question:

- **What does or could your university do to improve the experience and outcomes of students who commute to study?**

Things to think about:

- Curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment
- Extra-curricular opportunities
- Making friends and feeling like you belong
- Well-being and health issues

Facilitate this as an activity, by asking people to:

- Think about this question and write their answers on post-it notes.
- Use different colours for what is already being done and what could be done.
- Once people have written down their ideas, ask them to first share what the university already does, and encourage discussion about whether this happens across the university / everyone agrees.
- Then discuss people's ideas about what the university could do. Again, see if there is widespread agreement or alternative views.
- Discuss the extent to which people think the emphasis should be on providing information to students or on changing the way the university is organised and delivers the student experience? (or both)

Other thoughts or comments (5 mins)

Encourage people to share any other thoughts or comments about commuting to study in London by:

- Saying it now (if you have time)
- Writing it at the end of the background survey
- Emailing studentswhocommute@gmail.com
- Posting commuting photos and comments on Instagram #commuterstudents

Last things (5 mins)

- Ensure you collect in background surveys, consent forms, commuting handout, post-it notes.
- Thank everyone for their time and sharing their experiences and ideas.

6.2 Information and consent forms for research participants

Please read the following overview of the study and ethical guidelines. If you agree to participate in the study, please sign the consent form on the last page, and return it to the person who gave it to you. You should keep the overview and ethical guidelines.

Principal Investigator and contact details

Professor Liz Thomas, Liz Thomas Associates (LTA), liz@lizthomasassociates.co.uk; 07761560382.

Research overview

Liz Thomas Associates Ltd (LTA) has been commissioned by London Higher to better understand commuter students in London, to explore choices, expectations, experiences and suggestions for improvement. The focus is on students travelling to campus, whether living

at home or in other accommodation, who are full-time first degree students or postgraduate taught students. More specifically, the study will address the following research questions:

1. **What factors contributed to students being commuters?** This will explore why students commute, to what extent it was a decision or the only option, and who or what were/are the key drivers.
2. **What are the experiences of commuting?** This will cover mode of commute, time taken, costs, practical challenges, feelings about commuting, and awareness of the realities of commuting in advance of enrolment.
3. **What is the relationship between HE study and outside commitments?** This will consider other commitments and how they fit in and connect with HE study.
4. **How do students engage and belong in HE?** This will consider students engagement in different aspects of the HE experience, and how they feel about it, including connections with peers, academics etc.
5. **What are students' future goals and how are these related to HE study?** This will explore motivations for studying in HE.
6. **How do students' expectations of HE compare with their experiences?** This will consider the extent to which the experience is as they expected or better or worse, and why.
7. **How could the experience of commuting be improved by the university?** This will ask students to reflect on ways in which institutions could improve to enhance the commuter student experience.

The key output of this study will be a practically-oriented report and examples or case studies of effective practice to support commuter students' experience and outcomes through institutional change. Findings will be discussed with higher education providers in London and beyond. Findings may be disseminated via a peer-reviewed journal article.

Participation in the study: Research methods and ethical information

If you participate in the study it will be through a focus group discussion; you will also be asked to complete a short background survey, including demographic information, course and year of study, and living and commuting arrangements. You must be 18 years or older to participate.

Information collected during this research will be used to inform the outputs listed above; you will not be identified. If you participate in this study we commit to the following:

1. Your participation in the project is entirely voluntary.
2. You can withdraw at any time until 14 days after your focus group has taken place without giving reasons and will not be penalised for withdrawing nor will you be questioned on why you have withdrawn. Your withdrawal will not be reported to any member of staff within your institution beyond the research team.

3. Focus group discussions will be digitally recorded, and notes may be taken during the discussion, and a summary of issues will be written up after the discussion.
4. You will not be named in any publications or dissemination associated with this study, or in any informal feedback to your higher education provider.
5. If you have any preliminary questions or need further clarification please contact liz@lizthomasassociates.co.uk.
6. If you would like to make a complaint about the research please contact Paresh Shah, London Higher, paresh.shah@londonhigher.ac.uk.

Name:

Signature:

University or College:

Date:

Please return this form to the person that gave it to you. Thanks.

6.3 Background information survey

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. To assist us to understand your experiences please provide us with the following information. All information provided will be confidential and treated anonymously. Details will be stored securely at London Higher in password protected files, they will not be shared beyond the research team, and will be deleted after reporting and dissemination of the project has been completed in 2019. If you prefer not to answer any of the questions then this is fine.

Name: _____

Study information

Higher Education Institution you are attending: _____

Subject studied: _____

Year or level of study: _____

Target qualification (e.g. BSc, HND etc.): _____

Full-time or part-time study: _____

Approximate number of timetabled contact hours per week this semester:

Approximate number of **expected** private study hours per week this semester:

Approximate number of **actual** private study hours per week this semester:

Living arrangements

Did you move to London to study this course, if so where from? _____

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Where do you live?

Parents Student accommodation Friends/shared accommodation

Own home alone or with partner or children Other _____

Travel details

How far do you live from the main university or college site where you study?

How long does it take to travel to the university or college? _____

How do you usually travel? _____

How much does it cost per day (return journey)? _____

Demographic information

What is your gender? Male Female

How old were you when you started this course? _____

What, approximately, is your current annual family income (for your parents if under 21, for you if over 21)?

£25,000 or less £25,001 - £42,620 £42,621 or more

Don't know or don't wish to say

What is or was the main income earner's job? _____

(By "main income earner" we mean the person with the largest income, whether from employment, student support, pensions, state benefits, investments or any other source)

How would you describe your ethnicity?

_____ Prefer not to say

Do you have a disability or health problem that affects your ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities?

Yes No Prefer not to say

Please provide brief description _____

Educational background

Type of school you last attended:

State school College Private school

Other (please specify) _____

What was your highest qualification before starting this course (please state type of qualification and grades)?

Are you the first person in your family to enter higher education?

Yes No Don't know/prefer not to say

If not, who else has been? _____

Other responsibilities and activities

Do you have any caring responsibilities (e.g. for partner, children, parents, siblings)?

Yes No Don't know/prefer not to say

If yes, approximately how many hours a week does this involve? _____

Do you have a part-time job? Yes No

How many hours do you work a week? _____

What type of job do you have? _____

How long does it take you to travel to work from home or university?

Home _____ University _____

What other activities (clubs, sports, volunteering, social, work placements etc.) do you participate in at your **university**?

What other activities (clubs, sports, volunteering, social, work placements etc.) do you participate in **where you live**?

Are there any other activities or things you would like to do more of but you are unable to because of travel time and/or other commitments? Please provide details.

Other information


Please feel free to provide any other information about commuting to study and how the university does or could support you.

Please return this form to the person who gave it to you, or email it to liz@lizthomasassociates.co.uk.

6. 4 Commuter student experience handout

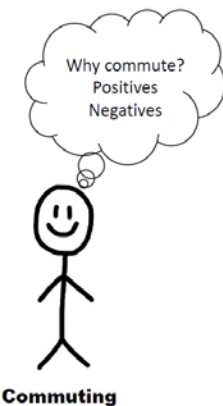
This handout was reproduced on A4 size paper to encourage participants to think about their experiences.

Name _____ Course _____ University _____



University


Why did you choose to study here?
What activities do you do here?
Who do you see?
How long do you spend here?
How frequently do you come here?
What factors influenced your decisions about studying and engaging here?



Why commute?
Positives
Negatives

Commuting

Why do you live here?
What do you do here?
Who do you see here?
What other responsibilities do you have?
How does living here influence your studying?



Term-time Home

6.5 Presentation

This presentation was developed that student-peer-researchers could use to facilitate and support students to engage, and to keep the facilitators on track.

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Commuting to study in London: Student discussions

On arrival

Welcome to the group discussion about commuting to study in London.

Please:

- Help yourself to refreshments.
- Make a name badge.
- Ensure you have completed the background survey
- Read the ethical information and sign the consent form.
- Ask any questions.

Introductions (5 mins)

- Quick introductions
- Explain the purpose of the research: to explore students' experiences of commuting to study in higher education and ways in which it could be improved.
- Briefly explain your role as student-peer-researcher.
- 90 minutes to think, talk and write about commuting to study at a university or college in London.

Ground rules (5 mins)

1. Respect the confidentiality of everyone, and do not repeat things outside of this room.
2. Respect the view of everyone in the room.
3. Avoid bad or offensive language.
4. Turn off mobile phones.
5. Don't talk over people.
6. Give everyone a chance to speak and develop their ideas, especially those who are quieter.
7. No secondary conversations.
8. Don't use phones, tablets, laptops, etc during the conversation.
9. Stay focused on the topics being discussed.
10. Please be honest and share as much as you feel comfortable with.

Getting started (10 mins)

Topic 1: Being a commuter (15 mins)

Overarching question:

- What is your experience of commuting to study in London?

Think about:

- What is good and what is challenging about commuting?
- How does commuting make you feel?
- Did you choose to commute, and if so why?
- Would you change anything about your university, living arrangements and travel arrangements if you were to plan your higher education study again?

Topic 2: Your student experience (15 mins)

Overarching question:

- To what extent has commuting to study affected, either positively or negatively, your student experience?

Things to think about:

- Attendance at lectures, seminars, labs etc
- Group work, studying with peers, using the library
- Involvement in extra-curricular activities e.g. societies, volunteering, rep.
- Making and going out with friends

Topic 3: Your outcomes (10 mins)

Overarching question:

- To what extent, if any, do you think commuting is likely to impact on what you gain from higher education?

Things to think about:

- Reasons for coming to university
- Positive or negative impact of commuting on achieving these goals
- Expectations of HE compared to your experience
- Likelihood of completing the course, getting a good degree, getting a graduate job, going onto postgraduate study

Topic 4: Enhancing the experience of commuting to study in London (20 mins)

Overarching question:

- What does or could your university do to improve the experience and outcomes of students who commute to study?

Write your answers on post-it notes. Use different colours for what is already being done and what could be done.

- To what extent should the emphasis be on providing information to students or on changing the way the university is organised and delivers the student experience?

Topic 4: Enhancing the experience of commuting to study in London

Things to think about:

- Curriculum, learning, teaching and assessment
- Extra-curricular opportunities
- Making friends and feeling like you belong
- Well-being and health issues

Any other thoughts? (5 mins)

If you have any other thoughts about commuting to study in London you can:

- Say it now
- Write it at the end of the background survey
- Email studentswhocommute@gmail.com
- Post your commuting photos and comments on Instagram #commuterstudents

Last things (5 mins)

Please hand in:

- Background surveys
- Consent forms
- Commuter student handout out
- Post-it notes
- Anything else you've written down and are willing to share

Thank you for your time, and sharing your ideas and experiences.

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