

# 105 Unpacking the connections and complexities of UK commuter students' HE experiences.

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## Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

## Abstract

In the UK around a quarter of undergraduate students are considered 'commuters', yet little is still known about this group (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018). Existing research has focused on what unites these students; their shared challenges and experiences across the student lifecycle. Nevertheless, this approach ignores the heterogeneity of this student group; their demographic characteristics, access barriers and HE experiences. This paper unpacks these complexities, exploring what connects and divides these students in their experiences in the context of empirical multi-sited ethnographic research across three universities in the North East & Yorkshire regions of the UK. Combined with a theoretical approach of Actor-network theory (ANT) to highlight the connections between and across institutions, this paper provides an innovative approach for exploring this topic and consequently problematises and unpacks the connections and complexities of UK commuter students' HE experiences in order to provide a richer understanding of this group.

## Full paper

The continued expansion of UK university provision, both in terms of the subject curriculum and flexibility for part-time and distance study, is attributed to increasing the number of university students who study locally whilst living at home (Finn, 2019). Around a quarter of students are believed to commute to their place of study (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018), yet it is unclear if the effects of COVID (Hillman, 2022) and/or the increases in cost of living (Blake, 2023) will have affected these numbers. An absence of sector-agreed terminology means that definitions of a 'commuter student' differ across the sector (Thomas, 2020). This paper uses the term 'commuter students' to refer to groups of students that live in the parental/guardian home or own residence, the latter of which can be owned or privately rented.

Research on the experiences of commuter students is limited, attributed to the lack of definition combined with the assumption that students move away from home to attend university (Maguire & Morris, 2018). The existing body of research has primarily focused on presenting a homogenous picture of commuter students' experiences; marrying the similarities in commuter students' experiences. Travel to/from campus is regularly presented as stressful, tiring and time consuming (Stalmirska & Mellon, 2022). Timetabling of classes is often the biggest issue raised by this student group, along with a lack of staff awareness and support (Thomas, 2020). Commuters are also characterised as rarely participating in social & extra-curricular activities (Christie et al., 2005). Whilst potentially an accurate portrayal of some commuter students' experiences, it misses those who do not face these challenges, perhaps due to differences in institutional support or their chosen mode of transport. Consequently, it is important that heterogeneity in commuter students' experiences is further explored (Thomas & Jones, 2017) in order to highlight these gaps in our understanding.

A multi-sited ethnography (MSE) was employed to explore commuter students' experiences of HE in the North East and Yorkshire regions of the UK; regions that have high numbers of commuter students in attendance (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018) yet are underexplored in academic research. The MSE comprised of three spatially distinct HE fieldsites: Institution A (small, Cathedrals Group), Institution B (large, Russell Group) and Institution C (medium, collegiate Russell Group). Data was collected through a combination of go-along interviews, participant observation and document analysis, with participants accompanied on their commutes and time on campus over a 6 month period. The use of ethnography to investigate this demographic group in a HE context is underutilised, yet a method that is valuable for considering the connections within and between sites (Marcus, 1995) whilst simultaneously acknowledging complex institutional, cultural and social influences (Pierides, 2010).

The research employs a theoretical lens of ANT to further highlight these interconnected, inextricable web of connections (Tummons et al., 2018) which commuters are influenced by, and thus embody, within the social world. Commuting to campus relies on a complex network of human (e.g. family members, academic tutors, university/home peers) and non-human (e.g. public transport, car parks, HE timetables) actants. Using ANT within this theoretical analysis allows for exploration into these assemblages, building a picture of the human and non-human connections commuter students have within their specific spatial and regional contexts and thus uncovering the complexity of their experiences in a way that has not yet been explored.

The findings presented in this paper derive from the primary research question 'What is being a commuter student like?' in which the theme of heterogeneity in relation to their lived experiences, both within and across their institutions, became apparent. This is particularly notable in their experiences of travel to and from campus, participation in social and extra-curricular activities and relationships with staff and the wider university. Experiences of travel to campus predicated on the convenience, availability and reliability of public transport in their region, in addition to institutional travel policies. A wide spectrum of participation in extra-curricular and social activities existed amongst participants within each institution. The reasons for (non)participation were complex and varied, often connected to strong (or absent) peer relationships at their HEI. Interaction and connection to their specific institutional spaces (departments, university facilities, academic classes) differed widely and particularly between students' experiences of the same institution which, in multiple instances, were in direct contradiction with each other.

These findings illustrate the experiences of UK commuter students with greater complexity than has been previously discussed, thus setting a precedent for future policy and academic research concerned with supporting and improving commuter students' experiences of HE.

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