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Commuter students: A student-centred, whole provider approach to improve student experiences and outcomes in technological higher education in Ireland

Liz Thomas

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Executive summary

Introduction

In Ireland around 40% of students remain in the family home - with their parents, partner or children - while participating in higher education (HE) and commute to their higher education institution (HEI). In 2024-25, the Technological Higher Education Association, now the Technological Universities Association (TUA) and the N-TUTORR Student Empowerment project leadership team, worked in partnership with Professor Liz Thomas, University of York. This resulted in an innovative project to explore commuter students' experiences in Irish HEIs, and to consider changes that would improve the experience and outcomes for commuter students.

Commuter experiences in the UK

This Irish study builds on qualitative research undertaken in the UK (Thomas & Jones 2017). This found that commuter students are poorly defined, but self-identified commuters experienced commuting to be more tiring, stressful, and expensive than they imagined. They also reported lower engagement in some elements of the academic experience, and in the enhancement and social domains. Available secondary evidence finds that commuter student status is often correlated with not only poorer engagement but also lower outcomes, such as continuation, completion, attainment, and progression to graduate employment.

Research design

The study reported here addressed the following two questions:

i. How does being a commuter student impact on student experiences and outcomes in technological HEIs in Ireland?
ii. How can technological HEIs improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students?

The study combined a semi-structured review and thematic analysis of the websites of the seven technological HEIs in Ireland, with two online 'town hall focus groups' (THFGs) involving 33 participants: six staff and 27 students, eight of whom were trained as facilitators and 'jurors' to reflect on the evidence heard. The THFGs addressed the key research questions, collecting individual responses via an online form; small groups discussed the topics and then a commuter student facilitator reported key points from their discussion into the main room. Ethical approval was secured from the University of York and participating HEIs.

Conceptual framing: Whole provider approach

The study was informed by a commitment to institutional change, rather than just expecting commuter students to change to fit into an unreformed HEI. Institutional change can be understood as a whole-provider approach (WPA). The whole-provider approach aims to support students to access, succeed in, and progress from HE through an inclusive student experience. This is facilitated by the institutional 'enabling environment', which involves aligning institutional policies, processes and organisation, and engaging stakeholders from senior leadership to staff and students, around the shared goal of an inclusive experience and equitable outcomes, underpinned by data and evidence.

Findings

Institutional recognition of and support for commuter students

The review of HEI websites (which is a snapshot of what was found at a single point in time - it is acknowledged that it is not an exhaustive review of what HEIs offer) found that commuter students are relatively poorly represented and served within institutional websites. There is limited explicit mention and recognition of commuter students on most websites, and this is reflected in the institutional strategic and policy documents that were on their sites. These documents often had no specific references to commuter students, and did not address the implications of 'local students' to, for example, learning and teaching approaches. Although the 'course search' functions on most websites suggested the option to study flexibly (e.g. online, hybrid or part-time) there were almost no undergraduate programmes that appeared to be available in such a mode. Most institutional websites assume students are moving and relocating to the HEI and the area, along with other assumptions about the age of the students and the experience of living away from home. Some websites do provide information about travel, such as bus timetables and car parking information, but this is not always aimed at new students. There are very few stories about commuter students, and none of the websites mention commuter students in the context of sports, clubs and societies which seem to be geared towards the residential student population. No single HEI consistently recognises and addresses the needs of commuter students, but there are examples of good practice in specific aspects across the websites reviewed. Overall this suggests that HEI websites could be more oriented towards attracting, informing and supporting commuter students.

The commute

In the THFGs students told us that they have to commute to campus frequently (typically four or five times per week); although some drove, the majority who participated in our study said they used public transport, and most had long commutes of between one and two hours, or more. Student participants could identify very few

advantages of commuting and generally found the journey itself to create numerous challenges, from the length of time it takes, the poor connections and delays, and parking issues. These factors, combined with academic and public transport timetables, contributed to students leaving home early and arriving back late - and feeling tired, with less time to study and a negative impact on their wellbeing. Commuting was also found to be expensive, due to both the direct costs of transport and indirect costs such as buying food on campus, both of which were compounded by the need to travel most or every day of the week. It was noted that there are different types of commuter students - those who remain in their home and live locally to the HEI, and those who travel from further afield. Differentiating commuter students would assist in understanding their experiences and developing responses; there is a need for a discussion of terminology in Ireland, and ideally agreement of a classification.

Studying

'The commute' was generally perceived to impact negatively on students' academic experiences. Commuting impacts on attendance at taught sessions in three key ways: arriving late due to delays, skipping lectures and using time in ways deemed more efficient, and leaving early due misalignment of the teaching and travel timetables. Students feel that commuting has a negative impact on their academic outcomes by reducing the time available for studying and due to the tiredness caused by travelling. There is a widespread feeling amongst the research participants that HEIs are not organised with commuter students in mind but rather for those who live near the HEI, with little or no use of online or blended approaches to teaching, provision of support or wider student experience opportunities. The key issues identified were the fragmented timetables, the lack of flexible ways of engaging, and the rigidity of the attendance policies. Timetables spread in-person sessions over four or five days per week, there can be large gaps in timetables, and lectures often start early and finish late, all resulting in very long days which compound tiredness. Attendance policies do not take into account the realities of commuter students' lives, and there is limited use of digital resources to support blended learning for students who are not able to attend in person. These issues can be mitigated or compounded by staff attitudes and practices: there are clearly staff who are understanding and 'make allowances' for commuter students, while others are either unaware or deliberately obstructive. Students identified issues relating to material not being made easily available to catch up (making it difficult for those to who have to enter late or leave early), the timetabling of assessments and one-to-one sessions etc at awkward times, and sessions overrunning at the end of the day. The lack of accommodation and recognition of commuter students by both the HEI and the staff makes students feel like they don't belong. The experiences described by commuter students in this study point to a lack of institutional awareness and compassion for commuter students, and the need for both organisational and cultural shifts to address these issues.

Wider engagement

Students discussed informal socialising with friends and participation in organised activities (e.g. sports clubs and student societies). Many activities take place during the evenings and long commutes, reduced transport options, and the need to get up early the next morning impede participation. Other institutional impediments include not being able to park overnight and a lack of catering for students wanting to wait between lectures ending and social activities beginning. Students said they had either no social life within the HEI or that it was severely impacted. Overall they were largely resigned to having very little engagement in the wider student experience as they found it sufficiently challenging just to engage with their taught sessions and find time and energy for their independent learning. This means that this large group of students are missing out on many opportunities that would otherwise contribute to their personal development, academic success and progression beyond HE.

Students' suggested improvements and priorities for change

In terms of supporting the commute, students suggested financial support to help with the costs of transport and purchasing food on campus, an increase in the number of buses provided between HEIs and transport hubs or popular commuter locations, and more institutional actions to encourage and support carpooling between commuter students. Within the academic context, students made recommendations relating to condensed timetabling, increased use of online learning resources, hybrid attendance, the timing of assessments and assessment deadlines, online provision of academic support, and the need for staff development to create a more commuter-compassionate academic experience. With regards to the wider student experience, students suggested more information about the support that is available and flexible delivery, more daytime events, alternative opportunities for engagement such as online or where commuters live, and mechanisms for commuter student voice and representation to influence HEI decision making. The students' suggestions and priorities for change inform the research recommendations.

Conclusions, implications and recommendations

This study found that commuting is challenging, and many aspects of the student experience are not inclusive. This conclusion is informed by contributions of commuter students and staff at the THFGs, and through a snapshot review of the HEI websites. The review of the websites also indicates that there may be a lack of institutional and senior leadership commitment to commuter students, which is further reflected in the structure of the institution. Policies and processes such as timetabling, attendance, use of online learning resources, provision of support, the organisation of the wider student experience, and student representation do not prioritise commuter students, and many disadvantage them. The culture of the HEIs is not generally empathetic

towards commuter students and they do not feel validated. Overall there is evidence of a lack of awareness, commitment, and skills amongst staff to ensure the inclusion of commuter students, resulting in these students feeling marginalised (although some individual staff were commended). Commuter students would like a 'voice' or representation to help them inform institutional decision making. Furthermore there is little use of data and evidence to improve commuter student experiences and outcomes. There are no national, or institutional definitions of commuter students, and little knowledge of their characteristics, experiences, or outcomes.

Although the study is modest it has used qualitative evidence and the WPA model to reveal commuter students' experiences and to suggest that HEI, regions, national organisations and policy makers need to do more. While the student accommodation shortage in Ireland is challenging, it is possible for HEIs, representative bodies, partners and policy makers to substantially improve the commuter student experience. This needs to be led from the top - both nationally and within HEIs - but also requires the commitment, knowledge and skill of staff to push for and drive this agenda forward. The report therefore makes recommendations for different stakeholders and acknowledges that some changes will be easier and faster to implement than others.

A: National policy makers and representative organisations

a. Recognise the poor experience of the many commuter students in the Irish HE system and commit to change.
b. Initiate a discussion of 'commuter student' terminology in Ireland and agree a definition - ideally with classification to recognise the multiplicity of types of commuters.
c. Develop national tools to record and monitor commuter students, including numbers, commuting characteristics, intersectional factors and educational outcomes. Build commuter student data collection into existing national data collection tools.
d. Produce data about commuter students in HEIs and regions.
e. Identify policy opportunities and levers to encourage HEIs to make changes to the accessibility of their teaching and learning provision to commuter students and to improve student engagement and success.
f. Identify policy opportunities and levers to encourage HEIs to make changes to improve the financial and personal wellbeing of commuter students.
g. Identify national policy opportunities to improve the financial situation of individual commuter students.
h. Identify policy opportunities and levers to encourage regional collaboration between HEIs and with transport providers.
i. Continue to advocate an increased support of affordable student accommodation, especially in regions with the most acute problems.

The first two and the last recommendations (a, b, i) should happen as soon as possible, while the other recommendations (c-h) may need a longer timeframe or need to be piloted in particular regions or HEIs.

B: Quick wins for HEIs

a. Make commuter students visible on the website, e.g. welcome students to the institution rather than the area; include information about travel as well as accommodation; include commuter student stories about studying and engaging in wider activities; provide tailored FAQs.
b. Explicitly welcome commuter students to the HEI during induction to validate commuter experiences and celebrate what they contribute, e.g. knowledge of the area; links to the community and region; time management and organisational skills.
c. Create a point of contact for commuter students and encourage commuter students to identify themselves to the HEI. This will facilitate the provision of information and support about travelling, studying and wider engagement, and they could be alerted directly about class cancellations etc.
d. Encourage commuter students to get to know each other so that they can travel together, car share, and meet on campus or in their local area.
e. Identify and promote a lounge or space for commuter students to spend time, store belongings, charge electronic devices, and consider providing a breakfast or lunch for commuters.
f. Identify programmes with particularly high numbers of commuter students and develop a commuter 'compassionate' timetable.
g. Organise staff training to raise awareness of commuters' experiences, and encourage and support staff to find out about their commuter students.
h. Help teaching staff to acknowledge the existence of commuters in their classes, discuss their experiences, and make adjustments, e.g. anticipating some late arrivals; providing recordings or summaries online; using the online learning tools to facilitate engagement before, during and after teaching.
i. Develop guidance for group working using online platforms to encourage inclusion of commuter students.
j. Work with the Students' Union to organise (additional) day-time activities, to set up a commuter-led group, or to deliver society talks and meetings online.
k. Ensure the institutional policy allows for and encourages the provision of one-to-one tutoring and student support via online platforms and at flexible times.
l. Find ways to allow commuter students to be heard and to shape institutional decision making. For example, develop a hybrid commuter student forum to meet others, raise issues of concern, provide representation, hear commuter student voices and generate an action plan.

C: Teaching Tips: How to be more 'commuter compassionate' in your teaching and student support practices

a. Commuter-inclusive language: When welcoming new students to your teaching session, programme or department, use commuter inclusive language: remember that not all students moved into new accommodation, are living on their own for the first time or are new to the city or region. But they will all be new to your session, programme, department and HEI.
b. Talk about commuting: Talk to your teaching groups and to individual students about commuting. A quick show of hands: who is living on campus, who is living locally, who is commuting from home? Or, a question about practical arrangements in a supervision session could be useful. When asking questions about practical issues and wellbeing, don't just refer to living away from home, moving into new accommodation and making new friends - consider also travel, parking, and balancing study requirements with commuting and other commitments.
c. Commuter student community: Encourage students who are commuting to find out where they are each commuting from and to think about sharing lifts or travelling together, meeting up before teaching sessions (they often arrive early to secure parking etc), or meeting up in their local areas.
d. Commuters can enrich the cohort experience: Recognise the benefits that commuters have and bring to the student cohort, for example, time management and organisational skills, knowledge of the area (e.g. best places to socialise or special offers and places to visit), and links to the community and region for other opportunities such as volunteering, employment, placements, or undertaking dissertation research.
e. Know what support is available and tell commuters about it: Find out what your HEI has to offer and signpost commuter students to the support that's available. Look for tailored information and support for commuter students, but also travelling and parking information, eating on campus, spaces for relaxation and to store belongings, access to a fridge, a kettle or microwave, and places where phones and other devices can be plugged in and charged up. Information about the VLE, online communication platforms and daytime activities may also be useful.
f. Be compassionate if commuters are late or need to leave early: Give consideration to the fact that if students arrive late this may not be due to disorganisation, but to unavoidable travel delays. Preventing them from entering a teaching session, or just drawing attention to late arrivals and potentially humiliating them, can be upsetting for students. Similarly, consider whether finishing on time or even early at the end of the day would be feasible, as it could make a big difference to commuters.
g. Support engagement beyond the classroom through the VLE: Use the VLE to support commuter students by ensuring that the slides are available in advance and that the recordings are available to be viewed after the teaching session. You might also

include a summary of a seminar discussion or a link to an online lab tutorial for students who were not able to attend in-person. Use the VLE tools to facilitate engagement before, during and after teaching.

h. Enable inclusive group work: Encourage and help student group work to be inclusive, e.g. meeting when everyone is on campus, using an online platform for online or hybrid meetings, or allocating work that plays to each other's strengths and access to resources. Commuters may want to undertake group work and independent study together using an online platform.
i. Schedule assessments and exams to accommodate commuters: Think about the timing of assessments and exams that you can control - an early start or late finish may unintentionally disadvantage commuter students.
j. Be compassionate and flexible when you can: Provide flexibility in the scheduling of personal tutor sessions and other one-to-one meetings, e.g. offering days and times adjacent to taught sessions, or offering an online option.
k. Embed co-curricular and social activities into your teaching: Try to build additional activities into teaching time, rather than outside of the timetable. Alternatively, organise co-curricular, professional development and course-related social activities during the day when commuters are on campus, or provide the opportunity to participate remotely.
l. Communicate changes and cancellations compassionately: Think about how you communicate with all students, but especially commuters, about changes or the cancellation of teaching sessions etc. Commuters often need the information earlier than students based on or near campus and they may not have access to their HEI email whilst travelling. You could state at the start of the year that if a class is to be cancelled or changed, that the information will be available via a particular communication channel by a specific time to help commuters plan ahead and not make a wasted journey.

D: Address commuter students via the institutional website

a. Welcome students to the institution, rather than the city or area.
b. Provide information about travel as well as accommodation.
c. Highlight courses or features of learning that allow students to study flexibly.
d. Provide information about how independent learning is supported, e.g. by the VLE, online learning communities and the library resources for students not based on campus.
e. Provide details of how campus support services can be accessed remotely (e.g. online, via email or in other locations).
f. Identify daytime, weekend or online clubs and societies that commuters might want to join.

g. Showcase opportunities beyond the HEI, for example local sports teams, volunteering opportunities or study spaces around the HEI and in locations where commuters live.
h. Include information about services and spaces that support commuter students (perhaps through a dedicated page).
i. Include commuter student stories about studying and engaging in wider activities.
j. Develop tailored FAQs for commuter students.

E: More significant changes for HEIs

a. Agree an institutional definition and classification of 'commuter students'.

b. Collect or extract institutional data about commuter students. This might include numbers in each educational unit, commuting characteristics, intersectional factors and educational outcomes. Build commuter student data collection into existing institutional data collection tools.

c. Produce accessible data about commuter students for staff in a range of roles within your HEI and train staff how to use the data.

d. Review how you communicate with students about commuting, attendance, in-class, group and independent learning, support, and the wider student experience to help students to know what is expected of them and to let them know if changes are made to scheduled activities.

e. Review institutional policies to consider how they may disadvantage commuter students and build consideration of commuter students into the development of future key strategic documents.

f. Prioritise reviewing policy and guidance around lecture recording, hybrid lectures and the role of the VLE in enabling students to learn.

g. Initiate timetable reform to reduce the number of days that students are required to be on campus, including providing students with the option to choose modules and courses based on mode or day/time of delivery.

h. Ensure that recruitment, induction and ongoing training for all staff builds in awareness of and capacity to teach and support commuter students.

i. Work with the Students' Union to provide a more inclusive range of clubs and societies, and to promote online engagement and participation in local areas.

j. Work with local HEIs, transport providers, and administrative authorities to address transportation and safety issues and look for accommodation solutions.

k. Review the financial support for commuter students and any ways that commuter students can be supported, for example via employing commuter students on campus or providing them with loans to purchase travel cards or even bikes.

l. Develop interventions for commuter students, such as carpooling with priority parking, commuter spaces on campus, online support, and personalised learning (i.e. choice of seminars/labs, modules, modes).

F: Further research

a. Institutional survey and qualitative research to understand more about commuter students.

b. Piloting of interventions specifically designed to support and improve the engagement of commuter students.

c. Collaborative work to re-imagine the delivery of HE to support the realities of higher education in the twenty-first century.

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About the author

Liz Thomas is professor of higher education at the University of York, Visting Professor at Aston Business School, Aston University and Visiting Professor at the Centre for Innovation in Higher Education at Anglia Ruskin. Liz has been researching student diversity, experiences and equitable outcomes in higher education for over twenty-five years. She is committed to using research to improve policy, practice and equity, including the What works? Student retention and success programme (2008-2017) which focused on building student engagement and belonging. In 2023-24 Liz worked with a number of institutions to develop a whole provider approach to student success. She first researched commuter students in England in 2017, and has continued to explore this issue further in 2024-25, through this project and related activities. She has written many reports, books, chapters and articles on student diversity and success. (ORCID: 0000-0003-2101-0067)

Full report

1. Introduction

In 2016-2017 research was commissioned and published about 'commuter students' in England (Thomas & Jones 2017). This was the first time that largescale qualitative research had been undertaken in this context, and the study raised awareness of this particular group of students, and led to higher education providers (HEPs) taking action to understand more about their commuter student population and to address some of the issues associated with lower rates of engagement. In 2024-25, the Technological Higher Education Association, now the Technological Universities Association (TUA) and the N-TUTORR Student Empowerment project leadership team worked in partnership with Professor Liz Thomas, University of York. This resulted in an innovative project to explore commuter students' experiences in technological higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland, and to consider changes that would improve the experience and outcomes for these students.

Commuter students are broadly defined as students who remain in the family home – with their parents, partner or children - while participating in higher education (HE). This is in contrast to relocating to live with other students on or near their HE campus and becoming a residential student. In Ireland two in five (40%) of college students live at home with their parents while participating in HE (Cullinan 2023). The Higher Education Authority Student Accommodation Survey 2023 asked nearly 23,000 students about how far they live during term-time from their place of study and how they travel. This found that while nearly half (48%) live between zero and five kilometres away from their place of study, the remainder live further away: 14% live between six and ten kilometres away, 14% live between 11 and 25 kilometres away, 13% live between 25 and 50 kilometres away, and 11% live more than 50 kilometres away. 36% of students said they walk and 3% said they cycle to their place of study; these are probably who we might term 'local students' (Fulford 2021). While 42% of respondents said they travel by public transport; 18% travel by car (including car-share) and 1% use multiple methods of transportation. Students who are full-time, male, younger, have a disability or impairment, study at technological HEIs, and are based in Dublin, are more likely to live with their parents and commute (Erskine & Harmon 2023).

Data and research from various countries including England and the US suggest that commuter students have poorer outcomes than residential students living on or near the campus (Thomas 2024), and this seems to be related to poorer rates of engagement (Tight 2020, Zepke 2021). Previous research in England (Thomas & Jones 2017) found that students generally found commuting to be expensive, time-consuming, tiring and stressful, and they experienced challenges on campus including not having a place to

spend time or a space to store things, and this contributed to a poor sense of belonging, which could be reinforced by negative staff attitudes (Thomas 2018 & 2020).

This study in the technological HE sector in Ireland aimed to establish an understanding of how commuter students are positioned and supported in Ireland, raise awareness of commuter student issues and put forward solutions suggested by commuter students. The project utilised online Town Hall Focus Groups, that enabled commuter students and staff to reflect on the experience of being a commuter student and ways to improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students. The discussions were facilitated by trained commuter student jurors, who reflected on the evidence and constructed a list of priorities for quick wins and longer-term objectives. A snapshot review of the current way in which commuter students are regarded, engaged and supported was undertaken by a review of institutional websites, including statements about, information intended for and support available to commuter students on the website, and various strategy documents. This report provides more details about the findings from the research in the UK, the process of data collection in Ireland, the findings from Ireland and the recommendations for various stakeholders. The conceptual framework used to analyse the findings is a whole provider approach (Thomas 2024b), which has proven to be useful to identify the key ways in which HEIs need to review their approach to improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students.

2. Commuter student experiences in the UK

This section of the report draws on the English research to explore the topic of commuter students, and their experiences and outcomes. In the UK around 25% of students continue living at the same address when they enter HE (Maguire & Morris, 2018), although increased living costs are encouraging more students to live at home and save money. When the initial study took place (Thomas & Jones 2017) there was little awareness or research about commuter students in the UK; indeed the term 'commuter students' is more widely used in other countries, such as the US (Jacoby & Garland, 2004), where there is a greater mix of residential and non-residential students. Since the publication of the 2017 study there has been much more interest in local and commuter students (e.g. Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018; Lightfoot, 2018; Mannerings, 2018; Maguire & Morris, 2018; Morris, 2018; Neves & Hillman, 2018; Miah, 2019; Van-de-Peer, 2020; (see Thomas 2024a for a review of institutional research about commuter students).

UK commuter students are more likely to have a lower household income, be from lower-socio-economic groups, be first generation entrants, be from an ethnic minority group, be a mature student, and/or have studied at a state school (Donnelly & Gamsu, 2018). Thus, commuter students often occupy multiple demographic categories

associated with under-representation in HE and poorer HE outcomes. The Office for Students (OfS – the HE Regulator in England) recognised local and commuter students as a group who are at risk of lower outcomes, and who might be supported to succeed through institutional Access and Participation Plans.

Thomas & Jones (2017) examined commuter students' perceptions of their engagement in learning (academic), co-curricular activities which contribute to personal and professional development (enhancement) and formal and informal socialisation with peers (social). Student engagement is poorly defined (Trowler, 2010, Kift 2024). It is broadly understood to include active involvement in learning, interaction with staff, participation in additional co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, connectedness with peers, to be enriching and to provide support (Coates, 2007), and to result in a sense of belonging and success (Thomas, 2012). The qualitative study examined the experiences of commuter students across nine HEPs in England through interviews and workshops with students and focus groups with staff.

2.1 The experience of commuting in England

Students in England typically find commuting to be more time consuming, tiring, expensive and stressful than they had anticipated. Travelling to campus would result in some students occasionally or regularly being late, while others would arrive very early to avoid the rush hour or secure parking, and then have to find somewhere to spend time on campus. Arriving late could attract various negative consequences, including being humiliated by teaching staff or not being allowed into a lecture, or assessment penalties. Students identified wider challenges about physical spaces on campus, which are connected to students' engagement and belonging. Commuters described having nowhere to store possessions, no place where they could spend time without having to study or spend money, and nowhere to keep and prepare food. Indeed, the cost and range of food available was another source of frustration, and being able to keep things cool, and warm up or cook food could help students to eat more healthily, within their cultural traditions, and keep costs down. The stresses and strains of travelling resulted in students making strategic decisions about when and what to attend on campus. They tended to prioritise academic engagement, with partial or no engagement in the wider student experience, and with few opportunities for social engagement.

2.2 Academic engagement in England

The commuter students who participated in the study tended to view themselves as 'good students', who were academically motivated and engaged. Many expressed high aspirations to achieve a good degree and secure a graduate job; indeed for many the focus was on becoming a graduate rather than being a student (Thomas 2023). Thus commuter students prioritised academic attendance and expressed preferences for

"not being disturbed", "avoiding distractions" and making sure that they "do well" (2020). While commuter students typically saw themselves as academically engaged students, they sometimes made decisions not to attend taught sessions, especially when the required time on campus was deemed to be insufficient to justify the travel time and expense. Participating in group work could be challenging, if all other group members lived near to the place of study and opted to meet in person, especially as commuter students were often also juggling other commitments, such as employment and caring responsibilities. Commuter students reported adopting a strategic mindset in planning their travel to campus, making a "value judgement about the efficacy of attending taught sessions" (Thomas & Jones 2017) with a preference for "self-study at home" if a class is not deemed sufficiently conducive to academic success (Thomas 2020a). Typical student suggestions to improve the academic experience included "student-centred timetabling" and the use of "lecture capture as an alternative way of engaging with academic sessions that they have paid for" (Thomas & Jones 2017).

2.3 Wider student experience in England

Though the literature emphasises the value of the holistic HE experience, the non-academic experience tends to be largely overlooked by commuting students. For some, it is something "nice to have," but not essential, while for others it is viewed as a distraction from the process of academic achievement and securing graduate employment. Student suggestions to improve the wider experience reflects this, with thoughts that opportunities could be maximised "within the academic context" or "timetabled into the gaps". Though commuters could lack a more complex understanding of the more implicit aspects of HE success and progression into the graduate labour market (Thomas 2020a), institutional culture beyond the timetable can alienate them from the wider student experience. With no "free space" to "belong" or store belongings on-campus, commuter students can feel "invisible" within institutional dialogue and provision. Lack of on-campus consideration affects those who would like to engage in typical student activities such as clubs and societies,due to the need to stay late, the challenges of hanging around before activities begin and struggling to travel home afterwards, many commuter students opted out of engagement in many or all aspects of the wider student experience. This contributes to a sense of "othering" and exclusion from the wider student experience and potentially from HE more generally.

2.4 Social engagement in England

Commuter students experience "significantly lower levels of social engagement" than their non-commuting peers (Thomas 2020a). With education as the "number one" (Thomas 2018) priority, this may be partly attributable to the prioritisation of academic study, as well as the need to juggle other responsibilities for some commuters and a certain rejection of the 'typical' student experience. Commuter students might leave

taught sessions early to get an earlier bus or train or beat the traffic, and thus miss out on the informal socialisation with peers and also teaching staff, and they tend not to hang around to participate in an organised activity that will necessitate more precarious travel arrangements. While retaining friends at home and within their own local area where they live may be a contributing factor, there was also a discourse related to the benefits of being a commuter and not succumbing to the risks of distraction by non-academic activities. This again aligns with the often expressed overriding commitment to the academic aspects of HE. There is also a smaller group of students however who feel that they are missing out on the social experience that is traditionally associated with being a student. Commuter students detailed the difficulties of trying to engage socially, once again pointing to events being "organised almost exclusively in the evenings and assuming physical presence" and a "lack of 'free' places", commuters have expressed the desire for "day-time activities" and the development of "commuter student communities". Beyond implications for student wellbeing and sense of belonging, this apparent "lack of social network" on-campus could well inhibit participation in some of the wider enhancement activities seen as critical to holistic HE success.

2.5 Commuter student outcomes

Commuting is correlated with poorer student outcomes in England, especially for those with longer commutes (e.g. Butt & Hiely-Rayner, no date; Fulford 2021; London Higher 2019). In Ireland the average one-way commute time for students living with their parents in 2022 was 52 minutes, which is longer than in other European countries (Cullinan 2023). Cullinan also found that the least well-off students had the longest commutes: on average their one-way commutes were 18 minutes longer than the for the most well-off.

In the UK commuter students (defined using various measures) are more likely to withdraw without an award (Woodfield 2014, Fulford 2021) and in particular 'travel time' was found to predict student progression or continuation (London Higher 2019). Various studies suggest that the commuting students have lower levels of attainment (e.g. Woodfield, 2014, Neves & Hillman, 2018, Webb & Turner, 2020, Butt & Hiley-Rayner, nd). The Institute for Employment Research (Artess et al., 2014) found that students who live at home were less likely to be employed in a graduate job than students who relocated to study (see also Maguire and Morris, 2018). A comparatively new Irish study considers the relationship between living arrangements, commute time, and student wellbeing (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023). Thus, while in neither England nor Ireland are commuter students an officially defined and monitored group, there is a growing body of evidence that commuting impacts negatively on student outcomes. On the one hand this may seem counterintuitive given the strong desire many expressed in England to achieve a good degree and their prioritisation of academic engagement. But,

engagement in the wider student experience is integral to both academic and wider success (Thomas 2020a). In addition, many commuter students come from already disadvantaged backgrounds as is noted above, and many commute to save money, to retain employment or contribute to care and income generation within the family. This study in Ireland emphasises how exhausting commuting can be, and how this negatively impacts on time for study and concentration both in classes and independent learning.

3. Institutional responses

While institutional responses to the experiences of commuter students are relatively new and still evolving (see for example Thomas 2024a), the approaches can be broadly defined as either focusing on changing students, or on changing institutions. This study is based on the premise that HEIs need to change.

3.1 Changing students

The focus on 'changing students' centres around the idea that commuter students' behaviours need to be changed to fit better within an unreformed HEP (Jones & Thomas 2005). Examples include providing commuter students with information about the realities of commuting, and raising awareness of the benefits of engaging in academic, enhancement and social activities on campus - to enable them to make more informed decisions about firstly becoming commuters and secondly what they participate in. A range of other interventions are designed to help students to spend more time on campus, by providing students with places to meet, store belongings or prepare food and relax; financial support for travel and subsidised accommodation on or near campus; or better parking, bus services and security to facilitate commuting. All of these approaches can be understood as creating a more 'sticky campus' (Warren & Mahoney 2017, and Robertson 2019) to entice commuter students to stay longer. While such initiatives may make modest changes to the HEI, they do not fundamentally change the way in which HE is delivered and experienced, but rather the changes could be viewed as tinkering around the edges with the intention of changing commuter student behaviour, and in contrast to more substantive institutional change.

3.2 Changing institutions

An alternative response to the presence of commuter students is the 'transformative' approach (Jones & Thomas 2005); this involves significant and fundamental institutional change, to meet the needs of these students:

Rather than being predicated on deficit models of potential entrants and positioning students as lacking… transformation requires serious and far-reaching structural change… informed by under-represented groups… [And] an institutional culture that

does not require participants to change before they can benefit from higher education… [I]t perceives diversity as a definite strength… activities are…underpinned and informed by valuing and learning from difference and diversity. (ibid p 618-619)

Changing institutions involves cultural and structural change. Cultural changes focus on changing attitudes and assumptions about commuter students. This may include recognising the skills and accomplishments of commuter students and acknowledging engagement beyond the HEI (Thomas 2020a); raising awareness of the realities of commuter students' lives (e.g. if they are delayed, or when allocating placements), normalising or celebrating commuter students and not framing non-residential students as second best (demonstrated in staff attitudes, on websites etc). Structural and organisational changes relate to the organisation and delivery of learning and the wider experience; for example the 'freedom to learn from home' (Miah 2018), opportunities for blended learning and a range of study modes (Brunel University 2021-2030), making face-to-face sessions more worthwhile (Smith 2018), consolidating the timetable, lecture capture, day-time extra-curricular and social activities and online meetings and appointments. The 'Block Model' is an example of institutional transformation introduced by Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia to meet the work/life balance needs of its diverse student population (McCluskey et al 2019). This diverges from the traditional 'broadcast' model of HE to a hybrid model that is 'flexible, immersive, inclusive' (p 3). It moves away from concurrent teaching of units to a sequential model. This focuses teaching on one unit of study at a time, which is assessed before moving to the next, and consolidates teaching into blocks spread over three days each week. As McCluskey et al note, the significance of the changes is not just about timetabling, but also about intensity, peer interaction and group dynamics, deeper relationships with the teaching team and the time spent on interactive learning. But it requires far-reaching institutional change:

This initiative required the disruption and redevelopment of all university systems to ensure students experience a supportive and seamless transition into, and journey through, their first year of study at university (McCluskey et al 2019 p 2).

The updated evidence (Samarawickrema & Cleary 2021) demonstrates this model has improved the satisfaction, continuation and attainment of a largely commuting student population, and contributed to closing equity gaps between student groups (see also Kift 2024).

3.3 Whole provider approach

The Victoria Block Model was informed by 'intentional, whole-of-institution change' (McCluskey et al 2019, p 2). In Australia the term 'whole-of-institution' has been closely associated with the first-year experience (FYE) and 'transition pedagogy' (Kift et al 2010). The first-year experience was characterised as piecemeal and in need of 'more

holistic and sustainable institution-wide approaches and enhancements' (Krause et al, 2005, section 8.8.6). Transition pedagogy (Kift 2009, Kift et al 2010) was defined as a 'third generation' approach to the first-year experience, combining 'first generation co-curricular and second generation curricular approaches' and accompanied by whole-of-institution transformation (Kift 2009). The latter was described as a 'comprehensive, integrated, and coordinated vision for a seamless FYE enacted across the entire institution and all of its disciplines, programmes and services' (Kift 2024, p18). This requires an 'educational ecosystem characterised by structural and cultural settings positively orientated towards inclusion and success' (Kift 2024, p19). The primary mechanism that is deployed to achieve whole-of-institution transformation is 'cross-institutional partnerships between academics, professional staff and students' (Kift 2024, p19). While the focus of these partnerships is on curricular interventions, the principles underpinning this are that student success, delivered via an inclusive curriculum model, is 'everyone's business'.

In England a whole provider approach (WPA) to the student experience in HE has emerged primarily in response to the efforts to ensure that all HEPs contribute to widening access and equitable outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds. The 'What Works?' programmes (Thomas 2012 and Thomas et al 2017) shifted understanding, policy and practice about retention and success in the UK to a state of increased maturity (Thomas 2020b), akin to work in Australia on the first-year experience (Kift et al 2010). While the first phase developed important understanding about engagement and belonging through learning and teaching (i.e. second-generation curricular approaches), the second phase of the 'What Works?' programme (Thomas et al 2017) found that embedding an inclusive academic experience necessitated all parts of the HEP to be involved (i.e. a third-generation approach), requiring:

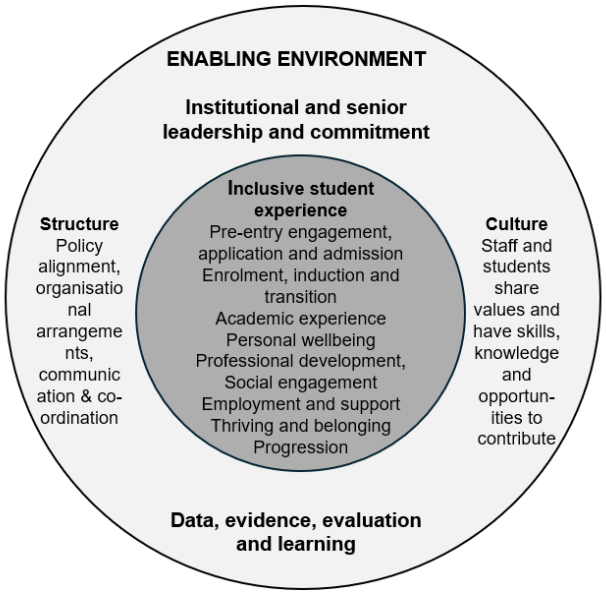
- Leadership at all levels, and staff in all roles across the institution;
- A culture that values and prioritises success;
- Policies that prioritise and foster success;
- Systems and processes that enable everyone to work towards success;
- Student involvement in the process of change;
- Data and evidence that inform success;
- Academic support and regulatory practices that nurture success.

The whole institution approach was adopted and spearheaded by the Office for Fair Access, who commissioned research to better understand a whole institution approach (Thomas 2017). A whole institution approach was subsequently defined by the Office for Fair Access (OFFA 2017) as:

An approach… that is embedded at all levels of an institution, not limited to a particular unit or department, engaging across all areas of its institutions' work and inclusive of senior management.

Building on these foundations, the concept of a 'whole provider approach' (recognising increased diversity in the HE sector) was embedded into Access and Participation Plans that were first required from HEPs by the Office for Students (OfS) in 2018, and again in 2023 (OfS 2023a, b & c). Further work in 2024 sought to better understand a whole provider approach (WPA), which was conceptualised to include an inclusive student experience situated in and facilitated by the institutional enabling environment (Thomas, 2024b), shown in figure 1.

Figure 1: Whole provider approach: Inclusive student experience and enabling environment



Source: Thomas 2024b, used with permission.

The key elements of an inclusive student experience are summarised below:

1. WPA student experience extends across the student lifecycle.
2. WPA student experience takes into account and works across the whole of students' lives.
3. WPA student experience (provision, services and wider opportunities) are available to students across the HEI, rather than just in particular sites, departments or courses.
4. WPA student experience is based on institutional change rather than requiring students to adapt and fit in (Kift 2015 & 2023, Thomas 2002, Thomas & Tight 2011, Zepke & Leach 2005).
5. The most effective way of reaching all students is through the curriculum (Kift 2024, Thomas 2012) rather than through supplementary activities, as participating in learning is often prioritised above the wider student experience (Thomas 2020a).

6. Sometimes a targeted and proactive approach is required to meet the needs of specific groups (Moore et al 2013, Stevenson et al 2019).
7. All staff, not just professional widening access and student success staff, contribute to WPA.
8. Students contribute to an inclusive WPA student experience, and at the very least do not negatively impact on the experience or outcomes of particular groups of students.

Building on earlier work (Thomas 2017 and Thomas et al 2017), the WPA model makes explicit the relationship between the inclusive student experience and the wider 'enabling environment': the latter is necessary to deliver the former. The most recent WPA model (Thomas 2024b) identifies key aspects with the HEPs that need to be in place to facilitate an inclusive student experience and in due course student equity (i.e. no gaps between student groups in relation to access, continuation, attainment, completion and progression beyond HE). The basic elements of the enabling environment are:

1. Commitment: Institutional and senior leadership commitment to widening access and student success is explicit, clearly communicated and demonstrated.
2. Structure: HEP policies and processes align with and enable widening access and student success. Communication and organisational arrangements facilitate widening access and student success.
3. Culture: Staff have awareness, commitment and skills and engage and collaborate to implement widening access and student success activities, tackle inequality and discrimination and achieve institutional goals. Students have awareness, commitment, skills and opportunities to contribute to and benefit from widening access and student success activities and to tackle inequality and discrimination.
4. Data , evidence, evaluation and learning underpin and drive widening access and student success work.

This WPA model is used to explore not just whether Irish HEIs offer an inclusive experience to commuter students, but also whether the enabling environment is set up to facilitate commuter student engagement and success, and the extent to which the emphasis is on students fitting in, or on institutional change. This theme is revisited in the conclusion section of this report.

4. Research with technological HEIs in Ireland

4.1 Research aims and context

Aims

This research and knowledge exchange project with the technological HE sector in Ireland aims to explore commuter students' experiences and to consider changes that would improve the experience and outcomes for these commuter students.

Technological higher education

The technological HE sector in Ireland comprises five newly established technological universities (TUs) and two institutes of technology (IoTs). Following the enactment of the Technological Universities Act, 2018, and at its behest, various configurations of institutes of technology merged into new TUs, which have a remit to meet regional social and economic needs by promoting access to applied programmes between levels 6 and 8 and undertaking industry-related research. Given the mission of the technological HE sector, these old and new HEIs are attractive to first generation entrants, mature students and other non-traditional groups, and many of these students are commuters (Erskine & Harmon, 2023).

Influences

This work explicitly drew on Thomas' previous work in England about commuter students, and sought to apply the WPA model to help inform both institutional and sector level change. The study was embedded in the Student Empowerment national work stream of N-TUTORR - the National Technological University Transformation for Recovery and Resilience programme. Overall N-TUTORR aimed to transform learning, teaching, and assessment by focussing on enhancing the student experience and developing the capabilities of all staff to achieve a more sustainable pedagogical environment. The N-TUTORR programme was funded under the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), supported by the EU Next Generation Fund. The programme was a partnership between the five technological universities and the two institutes of technology, supported by the Technological Higher Educational Association, now TUA. The student empowerment stream focused on empowering students and nurturing student-staff partnerships across the TU sector to contribute to meaningful and sustainable transformational change aligned with the overall N-TUTORR purpose.

4.2 Research methods

Research questions

The research sought to answer the following two broad questions:

i. How does being a commuter student impact on student experiences and outcomes in technological HEIs in Ireland?
ii. How can technological HEIs improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students?

The study prioritised understanding the experience of commuting, drawing on student and staff voices. The qualitative research data was collected from students and staff using online town hall focus groups; this was used to inform understanding about commuter students' experiences and outcomes, and to inform discussion about whether the experience is intentionally designed to be inclusive of commuter students. The institutional approach to engaging, supporting and enabling commuter students is also explored through a review of each HEI's website. This provides a snapshot of institutional provision in relation to both an inclusive commuter student experience and the institutional context or enabling environment; it is recognised that HEIs will also have activities that engage and support commuter students that were not picked up by this review. These methods are discussed in more detail in the following sections.

Ethical approval

A request for ethical approval was submitted to and approved by the Ethics Committee in the Department of Education at the University of York. While this was designed to cover participation in the study by students and staff from the targeted HEIs, the policies of the Irish institutions required that research conducted with their students and/or staff should be scrutinised by their own Research Ethics Committees This resulted in a delay to the start of the project, and ethical approval to participate in the empirical data collection was only secured in time in three HEIs. Student and staff who signed up to participate in the THFGs had to read the information about the study and complete the informed consent declaration as part of this process of enrolment.

Research participants

Research participants (students and staff) were invited to participate in the THFGs by an N-TUTORR institutional lead in HEIs with ethical approval. The information about the THFGs was available on the Technological Higher Education Association's website, and interested participants could enrol here and complete the informed consent process; participants had to provide an institutional email address to confirm eligibility. Student participants were paid for their time, while staff were not. Students could opt to be THFG participants, or commuter student jurors (see below), who had to undergo training for the role. Commuter student jurors facilitated small group discussions, reported the key themes to the larger group, and engaged in a discussion to review and prioritise the evidence at the end of each session. In total there were 33 participants in two online THFGs: six staff and 27 students, eight of whom were trained as facilitators and 'jurors' to reflect on the evidence heard.

Town Hall Focus Groups (THFGs)

Town Hall Focus Groups offer a strategy for conducting focus groups with large numbers of participants (Zuckerman-Parker & Shank, 2008). The approach developed by Zuckerman-Parker & Shank was adapted and trialled in this study as an innovative way of encouraging individual reflection and small group discussion, and collecting the views from different stakeholders and institutions. Initially a mixture of online and in-person THFGs were organised, but the online option proved to be more popular. This may however have been partly to do with the timing of the in-person THFG (on a Monday in December), but also the practicalities of commuter students' lives (e.g. balancing a range of commitments and not living close to their HEI). Commuter students were able to join the session wherever they were, including parked up in their cars.

In order to encourage individual reflection and sharing, and to inform small group discussion, the questions and prompts used in the THFGs were included as an online survey. In the small groups the facilitators encouraged participants to first write down their thoughts to help inform a meaningful discussion, and also to provide an alternative way for more reticent participants to contribute their views to the research. This proved to be a particularly effective mechanism for capturing information and views of all participants, and enabling more thoughtful discussion to take place.

The participants were arranged into groups of between four and eight participants. The intention had been to divide people up based on roles and institutions, for example allowing students from the same institution to work together and staff with similar roles to share experiences and ideas across HEIs. The numbers of participants were lower than hoped for, and so participants were randomly assigned to a group.

The first discussion centred on research question 1, examining the experience of being a commuter student: How does being a commuter student impact on student experiences and outcomes in technological HE in Ireland? There were a number of prompts to encourage reflection and sharing:

i. In what ways does being a commuter student impact on academic, professional and social engagement (positively and negatively)?
ii. How does the way higher education is organised impact negatively on commuter students' engagement and success?
iii. How do staff view/treat commuter students (in comparison to other students)?
iv. What institutional or sector level policies, processes and practices hinder commuter students to engage, belong and succeed?

The second discussion focused on research question two: Improving the experience and outcomes of commuter students. How can technological HEIs improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students? The following prompts were provided:

i. In an ideal world, how could the organisation, pedagogy and assessment of learning be improved to help students to engage? This might include timetabling, on-line learning, group working, more flexible deadlines, longer or shorter courses, etc.
ii. How could staff understand, value and support commuter students to engage and succeed in their learning experience?
iii. How could commuter students be helped to maximise the benefits available from wider higher education opportunities (e.g. leadership, volunteering, engagement with peers, accessing support services) by making them available in different ways?
iv. How could the expectations and organisation of higher education in Ireland be re-imagined to help commuter students to get the most from the learning experience and wider opportunities in higher education?

The commuter student jurors facilitated the discussion and reported back to the main group. At the end of the THFG, the participants were thanked and left, while the jurors joined in a discussion with the research team to reflect on the issues and solutions that had been raised and to identify priorities for change.

Commuter student jurors

When commuter student jurors were recruited they were asked to complete a short training package. This consisted of a narrated slide presentation covering:

- The purpose and learning outcomes of the training.
- An overview of the project.
- Defining commuter students, noting the lack of clarity and the lack of agreement about terms.
- Providing contextual information about commuter students in Ireland.
- Evidence of differential outcomes and how this might link to student engagement.
- The concept of a citizens' jury (CNDP 2024) and how this has been adapted to 'commuter student juries'.
- The structure of the THFGs and the role of the student jurors.
- Understanding the different types of responses to commuter students: changing students and changing institutions through cultural and structural issues.
- The process of reflection and deliberation and agreeing priorities and recommendations for change.

To qualify for the role of a facilitator and juror students had to complete the training and answer a set of questions based on the information provided.

The training was intended to provide practical skills, but also insight into the issues and the different approaches to the solutions, to help them make informed judgements

about the types of changes to recommend. In the jurors discussion, they were asked to consider:

i. What changes HEIs should make to enable commuter students to engage and succeed immediately (e.g. this academic year)?
ii. What changes should HEIs make before the start of the next academic year?
iii. What changes should be considered in the longer-term?

They were also offered the following guidance:

- You will need to consider what it is feasible for HEIs to do.
- You may also want to consider how much the focus should be on students or HEIs changing, the balance between changes to the academic experience and to the wider student experience.
- You should draw on the things you have heard during the THFG as well as your own experience to make the case for specific and relative priorities. You will also need to listen to others with an open minded and be prepared to modify or change your position.

In the second THFG the participants were told about the quick wins and other priorities for change identified in the first THFG. This provided an opportunity for reflection and development of the priorities.

Analysis of the qualitative data

The small group discussions were not recorded, but the feedback to the larger group and the jurors' final discussions were recorded and notes were taken during the discussion and themes were fed back for checking and clarification. These findings were used as the first round of analysis for each THFG. The information collected on the individual surveys proved to be a very rich source of evidence. This information was downloaded into a spreadsheet and analysed thematically, looking across the two THFGs, and mapped onto the themes identified from the THFG discussions and feedback. The recommendations for change were noted down for each jury, and then reviewed and developed using the findings from the THFG. Some of the 'quick wins' identified by the jurors were reclassified as medium or longer-term recommendations, as they did not appear to be feasible in the short-term. The student recommendations were subsequently compared and discussed in relation to the idea of changing students or changing institutions, and the extent to which they required more far reaching structural and cultural change to enable them to be effective.

Website review

Each of the institutional websites was reviewed in June 2025, using a semi-structured approach to see how commuter students are positioned and catered for within the information provided on the websites. First, keyword searches were conducted on the

terms ‘commuter’, ‘local students’ and ‘live-at-home’ students. Truncated versions of the terms were searched if no hits were found. All of the hits were reviewed – initially just the headline, but they were opened and read if they appeared to be relevant. In addition, the student-facing pages were reviewed. Each site offered the ability to search for courses; here the focus of the review was on undergraduate courses. Some sites offered options to search by mode of delivery, such as blended, online and part-time. Any other information relating to the ‘academic student experience’ was explored, and sections about the wider student experience. These pages revealed a mix of information relating to the HEP and the region, sports, clubs and societies, student stories, getting to the HEP and parking and accommodation. Finally, three key documents were searched for and reviewed: strategic plan, equality, diversity and inclusion document and learning and teaching policy. These were reviewed looking for explicit mentions of commuter, local or live-at-home students, as well as references to the community and region, flexibility and inclusion. The information was collected and recorded systematically using an Excel spreadsheet.

It is acknowledged that the search strategy may have missed some relevant information, however the process was relatively thorough and is likely to be better informed and more systematic than a potential student using the website to find out about studying at a particular institution. It is also noted that there are likely to be practices and activities that have not been picked up by this review and are not represented on the website. In particular, many student focused activities are likely to be publicised via internal or social media channels, which were outside the scope of this study. The contents of the website may also vary over time, and so this review simply provides a snapshot of the way in which commuter students are represented or are absent from the institutional websites. Initially it was planned to undertake a ‘fact-finding survey’ with each HEP, but this was not possible due to the ethical approvals process, and hence this review was undertaken as an alternative measure to establish a baseline or starting position.

Once the information was collected on the spreadsheet, it was reviewed and themes identified. The website contents for each ‘theme’ were compared across the seven institutions. Similarities and differences were noted, and examples to illustrate the approach being described were selected. This gives a snapshot of how commuter students are represented and supported on the website and in institutional stories and policies. The findings are reported in the next section.

5. Current institutional position of technological HEIs in Ireland

The HEI websites were reviewed to explore the current institutional position with regards to commuter students. In this section, the findings are synthesised into five

themes. The first theme explores the extent to which the websites explicitly recognise commuter students; the second theme examines institutional commitment via strategic plans and equality, diversity and inclusion statements. The theme examining the academic experience looks at the provision of flexible and blended learning options, and learning and teaching policies. The theme focusing on the wider student experience considers the assumptions and narratives associated with relocating and student accommodation, and commuting and travel information; the use of student stories and the discourses associated with students' sports, clubs and societies. The final theme reviews the current institutional position and positioning with regards to commuter students.

The identity of each of the HEIs is not explicitly stated, but rather they are numbered. The inclusion of quotations from HEI websites means however that institutional identities are potentially discoverable (e.g. if websites have not been updated since the review took place). The aim of this analysis is not to draw attention to the strengths and omissions of particular institutional websites and their approaches to recruiting, engaging and supporting commuter students, but rather to highlight practices and trends and to encourage recognition and affirmation of commuter students.

In summary, the review concludes that while commuter students are absent from some websites, even those that take a more balanced approach in some sections of the website demonstrate an inconsistent institutional positionality overall in terms of the recognition of commuter students within HEIs. All HEIs would benefit from reviewing and enhancing the information, support and representation of commuter students within their websites.

5.1 Explicit recognition of commuter students

This section considers how explicitly commuter students are presented on institutional websites - when this review took place. The findings suggest that while the majority of HEIs demonstrate little or no awareness of commuter students on their websites, this does vary between institutions, with some positive examples.

One institution demonstrates explicit awareness that some students commute (HEI6) while others relocate to the region, and addresses these alternative modes of engagement in a balanced way, for example by providing links to accommodation and links to travelling to the campus. HEI2 also appears to be aware that students may commute and not relocate: it talks about welcoming students to the HEI rather than to the city (in contrast to other institutions) and provides information about both commuting and accommodation. In contrast, some HEIs (HEI1, HEI3, HEI4 and HEI7) make no mention of commuter students, or other terms such as local or live at home students. For example, HEI1's website acknowledges the increased cost of living and

high demand for accommodation, but does not mention continuing to live at home and commuting as an option.

> *Multiple student accommodation options are available… While the [name of HEI] region is one of the most cost-effective student accommodation locations, there is increasing demand on supply. All student accommodation options are owned and run by private operators, but our Students' Union teams are on hand to help students find their perfect home away from home.* (HEI1)

On HEI7's website the only relevant information is about parking on campus. On HEI3's website the accommodation section appears to be very prominent, and the text assumes that students are moving away to study at university (and there is no information about travelling to the various campuses). On HEI4's website the only hit for 'commut*' is on the staff news pages and refers to the tax saving scheme for staff who commute. While at HEI5 there are many hits for the term 'commute' (85) and 'commuter' (68), but these mentions are grounded in a commitment to sustainability, rather than the student experience, and the information provided relates to commuting for staff and students to reduce their carbon footprint.

5.2 Institutional commitment

The institutional strategic documents generally indicate a commitment to the community and to the regions in which each HEI is located. For example:

> *At [HEI4] we have a clear focus on meeting the evolving needs of society and industry through applied learning and innovative thinking. By putting the individual needs of our students front-and-centre, we prioritise accessibility and opportunity for all. When we combine this student-first philosophy with next-generation thinking, we can help drive our region forward through education, research, and commercial collaboration. This is reflected in the strategic plan.* (HEI4)

In some cases this commitment extends to references to learning and teaching, and the need to ensure that this maximises the engagement of people locally and regionally. For example:

> *[HEI5] is cognisant of the need to recast the student experience in the light of technological change and rapidly changing employment patterns and career pathways. The University will promote access and flexibility in designing and delivering programmes and will direct its efforts in particular towards answering the skills and human capital development needs of regional society and the economy.* (HEI5 strategic plan 2023-2028)

But there is no explicit reference to how being a local or commuter student will necessitate institutional change. A commitment to institutional change is most clearly articulated in its strategic plan by HEI1, it states: “As a new university with deep roots in our community, culture, and economy, we are committed to serving [region of Ireland]”, and the strategy goes on to talk about ‘enabling education’: “We focus on flexible, inclusive learning, enhanced infrastructure, and innovative teaching to foster employability, sustainability, and student success”. This is not however reflected explicitly in the website more generally.

The equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) statements were also reviewed. These tended to reinforce and extend the key messages from the strategic plans. None of the EDI statements explicitly mentioned local, commuter or live-at-home students. Thus on balance, the HEIs do not demonstrate a strong or holistic commitment to commuter students, and a more traditional view of higher education students seems to persist.

5.3 Academic experience

Flexible or blended learning courses

On the front page of the majority of HEI websites there was a prominent option to search for courses (this may reflect the time of year when this review was undertaken). These generally include an option to select the mode of delivery (e.g. online or blended or part-time). Some institutions appear to have very few flexible courses (e.g. HEI4, and HEI7), while at others there appear to be relatively few that are full-time undergraduate courses (e.g. HEI1), or the website does not provide sufficient information about what proportion of time is on campus (HEI3). On theHEI5 website there seem to be flexible-mode courses available for each level of study, but these do not seem to be undergraduate courses applied for through the CAO (central admissions office). Interestingly the key word search revealed one course, at HEI1,that specifically mentions commuter students: the DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) programme structure references the commuter learner model, and emphasises flexible scheduling and use of technology to facilitate learning around a busy schedule. This however is not an undergraduate course, but is a good example of how a website can signal that a course is ‘commuter-friendly’. Only one institution, HEI2, provided information about their blended learning approach in general on the front page.

> *At [HEI2], [the branded VLE] is used to deliver course content for our fully online courses, much of the content for mixed-mode or hybrid courses, and the majority of our face-to-face classes utilize [the branded VLE] for a variety of reasons as well. [The branded VLE] allows students to access course content for their courses, submit assignments, participate in discussions, communicate with the instructor and classmates, take quizzes and exams, and more.* (HEI2)

The same HEI also provided information about its library, stating that the online library is available 24/7, both on campus and off campus. Only this HEI indicated that a blended learning approach, with flexible engagement with course contents, might be a genuine possibility for commuter students.

Learning and teaching policies

While most of the institutions have their education or learning and teaching policy available on their website, none of these documents explicitly mention commuter students (or local or live-at-home students). Quite a few however state their commitment to inclusive learning or an inclusive curriculum, which for example, "promotes and facilitates the adoption of inclusive teaching and learning methods designed to accommodate all learners" (HEI3). In several cases this commitment is underpinned by the use of UDL (universal design for learning) to promote accessibility through the curriculum design and pedagogy. UDL however may not make sufficient changes for commuter students (for example alternative modes of delivery, extensions and flexibility with regards to assessment and alternative ways of undertaking group work), and these policies do not talk about changing the structural organisation of learning and teaching to meet the needs of commuter students and facilitate attendance, engagement and success. Reflecting on the needs of commuter students in such policies would be a useful development.

5.4 Wider student experience

Turning to the wider student experience, beyond the academic experience, a mixed picture emerges. An important signifier is the way in which the alternatives of relocating and living in student accommodation and remaining at home and travelling to campus are portrayed. The second topic considered is the use of student stories and the third relates to students' sports clubs and societies.

Student accommodation and travel information

A number of the institutional websites embed an assumption about students 'moving' to begin their HE experience and career. For example, the first section of the Campus Life page for HEI3 is about accommodation:

> *One of the most important aspects of life as a student is finding a suitable place to live most appropriate to their needs. Students should remember when choosing a place to stay that this will be your home for the academic year. It is very important that you view the property if possible and read any contracts/leases before you secure the room with a deposit.* (HEI3)

This implies all students relocate to study at this institution, which is not the case based on some of the other evidence gleaned from the website and based on the available evidence about commuter students in Ireland. Another institutional website

implies that students move to the region (HEI1): “Our students enjoy an unforgettable student life experience. The region is known for its friendly people, vibrant towns and cities, and stunning natural beauty”. This statement positions students as coming into the region, rather than being from or even part of the region. Similarly, HEI5 makes an assumption about student accommodation in the first paragraph in its section about ‘undergraduate study’. Even the term ‘orientation’ could be interpreted as being new to the area, not just the institution.

> *Starting university is a really exciting time, and even a little daunting. No doubt you have lots of questions about registering for your course, finding out about orientation, accommodation options and more.* (HEI5)

Other institutions (e.g. HEI2 and HEI6) do not make these assumptions, and provide information about accommodation and about travel and parking, and do not assume that people are relocating to the area. HEI6 goes further, and implies that commuting is the norm: “While our campus is predominantly a commuter campus, the [HEI6I] Students Union provides students with support and advice around accommodation. There is a selection of accommodation options available to students.” (HEI6). This is a great example of commuting being the norm, and the residential option as the ‘other’ way to engage.

Real students’ stories

Some institutions (e.g. HEI4 and HEI5) include student stories on their website which feature local/commuter students or graduates. This is positive and normalises commuting and studying. None of these however explore the process of deciding to be a commuter student or the experience of being a commuter student. Furthermore it is quite difficult to look for commuter student experiences – while this might suggest that commuting is not atypical, it does make it difficult for potential students to learn about the realities of commuting. HEI6 has a news story promoting its advertising campaign about students’ journeys. The article says “The campaign features local students who are pursuing degrees”. The article continues:

> *The HEI strives to create a safe and supportive environment where everyone can reach their full potential to participate and contribute to life and society. [HEI6] currently hosts students from over 47 different countries, and the Institute is proud of this rich diversity within their student cohort which lends itself to all student’s cultural experience within HEI6’s community.* (HEI6)

While this news item does not really celebrate that these are local students, and certainly does not indicate how many students might be classed as local or regional students, it is encouraging to see commuter students recognised within an institutional news story.

Sports clubs and societies

Although all of the HEIs have a commitment to their local communities and regions, and some are explicit in recognising and addressing the needs of commuter students in their websites, academic provision and student accommodation and travel information, none of the HEIs mention commuter students in the context of sports clubs and student societies. Some sites reinforce the assumptions noted above about students 'relocating' and 'discovering' the city or region, while this is not present in others. No instances were found of societies for commuter students, or clubs that operate during the daytime to facilitate the engagement of students who do not live locally. This level of detail however may not be routinely included in HEI websites, but it could be worth noting that some clubs and societies do operate during the day when this is the case.

5.5 Inconsistency in the institutional positionality

The review of websites indicates that some HEIs appear to have greater recognition of, commitment to, and support for their commuter student populations than others, but overall these positions may be incomplete or even inconsistent. For example, the website of HEI2 appears to be careful not to assume that students are relocating to the city or region, and rather talks about welcoming people to the HEI. On the home page the first tab is about the VLE which implies more flexible ways of engaging with learning. The information about accommodation is relatively hidden (three clicks from home page), and there is also detailed information about travelling to each campus (although this is not clearly signed posted from the home page and is quite difficult to find). These points indicate good recognition of and support for commuter students. But in the strategic documents of HEI2, including the strategic plan, the learning and teaching policy and the EDI statement, recognition, commitment and support for commuters is not explicit, nor is it evident in the clubs and societies' pages. HEI6 provides a second example of recognising commuter students, that is not followed through within the strategic policy context. HEI6 demonstrates recognition that some students commute, and some relocate to the city/region and there is a balanced approach regarding these two student groups. Despite this, the commitment is not fully reflected in the strategic documents or in the academic experience, or in some of the ways in which commuter students are positioned. For example, the website seeks to explain why students should choose this HEI. The first point is that it is a global institution, while the fifth point is that it is easy to commute to, and there is no reference within this section to inclusive or flexible learning. HEI1 offers a further example, HEI1 is explicit in its commitment to the city/region, it talks about the high cost of living and the housing shortage, and its commitment to enabling education, but the website barely mentions local, commuter or live-at-home students (only in relation to one specific postgraduate

course), indicating a lack of support for the practical and engagement needs of commuter students.

5.6 Conclusions about the current approach to commuter students in HEIs in Ireland

In conclusion, this snapshot of HEIs approach to commuter students through their websites – which are the 'shop window' for students looking to select an HEI to study at – is relatively weak. There is significant variation between the seven HEIs reviewed, but there is no outright winner, or model of good practice that should be emulated by others, but there are specific examples of good practice. While the research in England did not formally review websites, it is only since that research in 2016/17 that some HEIs have been explicitly addressing commuter students through their websites. Birmingham City University was one of the institutions involved in this study, who subsequently made changes to make commuter students more visible, to feel valued, supported and recognised. A search of the term 'commuter' on their website brings up 49 hits, many of which are highly relevant to commuter students, including:

- How to save money as a commuter student (addressing the hidden costs of commuting).
- Should I live at home for university? Looking at the benefits of living at home and preparing students for life as a commuter.
- Parking guide. Find out where to park cheaply close to the campuses.
- Five tips for students who live at home. A commuter student shares her top tips.

The review together with this example may indicate to Irish HEIs some ways in which they may wish to update their websites to be more cognisant of commuter students (see section 10.4).

6. Student experiences

This section of the report draws on the discussions at the THFGs, and on the written responses that were provided as part of the THFGs. The first sub-section considers the experience of commuting, including the advantages, challenges and disadvantages of commuting, the impact on well-being and mental health and the financial dimensions of commuting. This segment culminates with a discussion about the need to differentiate 'commuter student groups'. The following sub-section looks at academic experience, in particular attendance issues, tiredness and a lack of time which impact on studying, institutional organisational issues, particularly timetabling, and staff attitudes and institutional culture. The final sub-section considers students' engagement in the wider student experience, particularly the social side of life.

6.1 The commute

Fourteen students[1] explicitly told us about their commute, including details such as frequency, mode of transport, time taken and what is positive and what is challenging about commuting (although not all respondents provided details about all of these issues). From this qualitative information it seems that students commute between three and five days a week, with one student commuting weekly. Eight students told us they have to be on campus five days per week, and overall four or five times per week seems typical. Based on the information provided six students take the bus; three students use multiple methods of transportation (usually train and bus, and some mentioned walking); two drive and one uses just the train. The commute times vary: five students indicated that they have only a short commute up to around half an hour, although the length of the commute varies (e.g. depending on time of day and traffic conditions); eight students indicated very long commutes between one and two hours or more each day "*It wastes 2 hours of being on the road every single day*" (THFG2: 4). The weekly commute for one student participant varies in length from three to five hours (THFG 2: 6). In summary, the majority of students used public transport and had quite long commutes; most needed to be on campus frequently. These findings broadly align with the findings from the Higher Education Authority Student Accommodation Survey 2023 reported in the introduction, except none of our participants reported using walking as the primary method of transportation, perhaps indicating that they have further to travel.

Advantages of commuting

Overall the students did not identify many advantages of commuting. Some students commented that the cost of travel is 'fairly priced', and the public transport provides facilities such as toilets and electric points to charge phones. The most positive benefit is being able to see family frequently, and being able to do other activities, such as read or do make-up whilst travelling. These quotes are typical:

> *The positives of commuting are seeing my family each day and it is less expensive than accommodation. Commuting is very tiring as it takes a lot of time out of the day and as public transport runs less in the evening it means I cannot always attend events in the evening.* (THFG2: 15)

> *The commute I take is 2hr 30 mins each way. I take the bus and travel 3 to 4 times a week. The good points of the commute: [a] toilet on board and*

[1] This question was only directly asked in THFG2.

> *[I'm able] to charge electronic facilities [sic]. The challenges are the time lost and late for the first class in the morning.* (THFG2: 14)

One student noted: *I get time to relax and unwind on the bus, but I can't do anything extracurricular* (THFG 2: 13). Other students also commented that the commute provides a gap or space between studying and being at home; this point was raised in previous research in relation to helping to maintain a work or study life balance (London Higher 2019).

> *I think being a commuter student can impact positively and negatively for me. Positively - College work is left at college. As I do it at college between classes. I also find I am more organised as I have no choice, if I don't have my stuff with me, it's not like I can run home to get it.* (THFG1: 13)

> *Positively allows commuter students to balance their school and home life balance. Those active in sports clubs would have a chance to stay in their community sports clubs or organizations.* (THFG1: 14)

In this discussion it was also recognised that remaining at home allows engagement in the local community to continue, e.g. in sports teams, and to retain employment. It was also noted that being a commuter requires students to be more organised, managing travel, study, working and other commitments. In the second focus group, a student (THFG2:9) commented that being a commuter develops good time keeping skills. For a few students commuting provides an opportunity for socialising, for example travelling with a friend.

> *Socially it is positive, to me, as I live close to my best friends and we commute together every day almost.* (THFG2: 8)

Some students either directly or implicitly identified the cost advantages of commuting, which are discussed below.

Staff identified more (potential) positives of commuting:

> *Positively - stability of home environment; not having to adjust to living with new people and financially cheaper. Probably ask questions of a peer as you walk down the corridor as opposed to asking a peer online or even ask a question to the lecturer. Students who have a caring responsibility can continue with this role albeit it will cause challenges. Commuting students who are involved in a sporting club can continue to train /play with their team during the weekdays. Negatively -travel /transportation infra structure isn't supportive. Commuting is tiring.* (THFG1: 11, staff)

While some of these points were reflected in the commuter students' contributions, it is striking how in this study commuting was much more likely to be experienced

negatively, and in contrast to England, no-one actively promoted commuting as a positive choice in the THFGs.

Challenges and disadvantages of commuting

The challenges and problems identified with commuting were more numerous, although not particularly surprising:

- Length of journey
- Waking up early
- Limited number of buses or trains per day
- Poor connections resulting in rushing, missing connections and long waits
- Late running buses or trains
- Cancelled buses and other delays
- Parking (lack of available spaces, may need to walk further and then late to class, or arrive very early even if you do not have a class until later in the day)
- Weather – cold and wet
- Arriving late or missing classes
- Finding sufficient time for self-study
- No place to spend time on campus if you have to wait for transport.
- Difficult to engage socially with friends

While some of these challenges are associated with the experience of commuting, it was noted that the timing of lectures does not take into account the commuter student or the wider context in which the HEI is located and that students and staff need to negotiate. For example, local traffic congestion makes arriving for 9am more challenging:

> *Time, the start time in particular (a lot of 9am lectures) is the similar start time to adjacent primary and secondary schools which leads to traffic congestion. [The] timetable is 5 days but some days are heavier than others which requires students to attend each day - maybe 2hour lecturer in 1 day but the commute is longer than the lecture. All of this leads to less engagement.* (THFG1:11, staff)

One issue of note is the timings of buses in relation to the teaching timetable, which was discussed in both focus groups. For example, one student wrote:

> *I commute from [name of home town] every day, train often is delayed in [place A] and then [place B], I get the earliest train and the first bus possible from station but am usually 5-10 mins late for my classes. The train times are inconvenient with my timetable for going home as I'm usually left with 15 mins to get across the city to catch train or left for nearly 2 hours waiting for one. Busses can often be full at the end of the*

> *day and if I can't get on then I'm also more than likely missing my train home.* (THFG2: 1)

This portrays the logistics of commuting as a severe and persistent problem, which means that commuting directly negatively impacts on learning, and potentially on study success. It is not clear from the THFG evidence to what extent this is a problem, but the issue of poor alignment between teaching and travel timetables was raised in both THFGs by different students and at different HEIs, suggesting it warrants more consideration.

Parking was also raised as a problematic dimension of commuting, in general there appears to be an insufficient amount of parking available for commuting students. One solution adopted by commuter students is to arrive early, and then to wait around until they have teaching sessions.

> *I think parking is another big problem: having a class at 11 means you must be in the campus for 8 for parking. I think every year the parking seems to be getting worse and worse and people are desperate and parking anywhere resulting in them getting clamped.* (THFG1: 13)

Some of the challenges of commuting by public transport or by car can be intensified if students do not feel that they have a suitable place to spend time and wait on campus (e.g. if arriving early, between teaching session and whilst waiting for a later bus):

> *Sometimes it can, such as if you have to wait around for transport, there may not be many places on campus to wait.* (THFG2: 15)

The poor alignment between timetables, the shortage of parking and nowhere to spend time contribute to feelings of dissatisfaction, and not being recognised or valued by their HEIs. Travelling can also impact on students' wellbeing and financial circumstances.

Impact on wellbeing

As the discussion above has indicated, commuting takes a significant amount of time and students often have to arrive early (e.g. to secure a parking space or to avoid being late) and hang around at the end of the day for buses and trains. Furthermore, the majority of students need to be on campus four or five times per week. These conditions impact on the wellbeing of commuter students. Students describe how commuting makes them tired, reduces their study time and time for self-care and leads some to feel overwhelmed or that they are not coping, especially during the assessment period.

> *[I'm] very tired throughout the day and when I get home, due to early starts. But having assignments etc to finish when I get home leads to me*

> *having less time to myself and poor sleep, usually late for my classes so am missing crucial time.* (THFG2: 1)
>
> *I don't have enough time to have my own time, as when I get home I just have enough time to study and do projects.* (THFG2: 4)
>
> *It can be tiring having lectures until six in the evening and being up at six in the morning, and gone from home by 6:30. The later lectures mean I won't be home until approx 8pm. This is physically and mentally draining. I think coming into exam season, it can be especially draining and feel like you are just about keeping your head above water.* (THFG 1: 13)

Financial impact

Commuting can be seen as having a positive financial impact, saving money on accommodation: "… it saves money on rent, [and] there is familial support available" (THFG1:7). But many students felt that commuting is expensive and creates additional financial challenges and barriers. While some students felt public transport costs were 'fair', students who had to commute via car generally found the cost of fuel and vehicle maintenance to be high:

> *Commuting also adds another financial barrier to education in the cost of driving and maintaining a car and getting the bus or multiple buses.* (THFG1: 5)

Another, perhaps hidden or unexpected cost relates to food, especially given the frequency and duration that students need to be on campus. Bringing food in from home is not always feasible, as students said they have nowhere on campus to store and eat the food, and catering on (some) campuses is seen as expensive, and not always providing healthy options. For example:

> *I think overall commuting can be expensive between diesel and car maintenance costs, as well as buying meals in college. As bringing food to college from home often goes off due to the heat in the car for the winter months. I also find from a nutritional point for me I'm having two breakfasts and two dinners, as I have breakfast at home at 6:15 and then a second breakfast when I get to [HEI] and parked because with traffic it might be 9 or 10am. Coming up to two or three I might get dinner and then another snack before going home again and having dinner at home again.* (THFG1: 13)

Participants noted that there is no specific funding for those commuting – as it is assumed to be a low-cost option, compared to living in accommodation – and they felt this was unfair and should be addressed.

> *Minimal support for transportation costs- commuter students face high costs involved with transport. Although with a leap card you are able to get a discount, the costs are still high… the government does not offer as much support.* (THFG1: 12)

Students in London have also pointed to the high costs associated with commuting. A study by Arts SU (2024) found that the average cost of commuting per week for all respondents was between £21 and £30. However, for commuter students, the average cost was between £71 and £100 per week. The cost of commuting was considered to have a negative impact on commuter students socialisation: 78% of commuter respondents reported missing out on socialising with friends due to the cost of travel, 66% said they missed out on taking part in sports clubs and societies and 46% missed out on attending class; these rates were all higher than for non-commuter students.

Differentiating 'commuter' student groups

While the preceding discussion identifies mostly the challenges of commuting, it is instructive to reflect on the comments about the need to differentiate commuter student groups. This was not addressed directly in the THFGs, but was brought up in both THFG discussions, and it needs to be borne in mind when considering the impact of commuting on the student experience.

Students who live relatively near to the HEI and commute experience few or no disadvantages (e.g. THFG2: 2,10, 12). Indeed, a couple of the THFG participants noted the different types of commuter students, and that this impacts differentially on their experience. This is summarised by this member of staff (also THFG1:14):

> *There are different types of commuting students - the city commuting student; the near adjacent commuting student and the long-distance commuting student.* (THFG1: 11, staff)

A similar debate has taken place in the UK (Thomas 2024a). For example, Fulford (2021) prefers 'live-at-home' or local students, while Webb & Turner (2020) use a tripartite definition of residential status: living locally in existing accommodation, commuting from afar, or having relocated to study. It seems that there is a need for a discussion of terminology in Ireland, and ideally agreement of a classification.

6.2 Studying

From the preceding discussion on 'the commute' it could be inferred that there are potentially negative consequences of commuting on studying and academic engagement and indeed this is what students felt in both THFGs. A number of issues were raised by commuter students and are discussed: attendance including arriving late, missing lectures, and leaving early; tiredness impacting on concentration and time

for independent study and implications for study success; institutional organisational issues (particularly the timetable); and staff attitudes and institutional culture.

Attendance

The experience of commuting impacts on attendance at taught sessions in three key ways: arriving late, missing lectures and leaving early. Travel disruptions and personal issues can lead to students arriving late and missing teaching sessions. A member of staff commented that commuting can impact on attendance, especially first thing in the morning, and a long commute result in tiredness and a lack of concentration, and this was confirmed by the student comments:

> *Commuter students are coming late to classes/lectures/assessments notably at 9am/10am due to poor public transport. If they have a particularly long commute, it impacts on their concentration levels in class.* (THFG1: 8, staff)

> *…you cannot get away with accidentally oversleeping as you have lost an hour of college already. Attendance is important and sometimes buses will cancel their trip and suddenly you are stranded and missed a whole day.* (THFG2: 8)

While travel delays and student disorganisation can result in unintentionally missing lectures, students also described making strategic decisions to 'skip' lectures, believing that they can use their time more effectively in other ways (see Thomas 2018).

> *[Commuter students] may skip lectures due to costs involved or time taken commuting. This can in turn affect their learning. Commuting can take up time which could instead be used to study. (THFG1: 12)*

For some students the misalignment of the teaching and travel timetables means that students leave early, and they may miss vital information or opportunities for interaction with teaching staff and peers (see Thomas 2020a for a discussion on this). THFG participants also talked about the significant gaps between lectures and how this may discourage attendance.

> *Timetables set in bad ways - huge breaks between lectures.* (THFG2: 12)

> *Also if the timetable has been organised in a way that there is only one class sometimes it does not make sense to spend hours commuting for 1 hour of college when you could be getting more work done at home.* (THFG2: 15)

> *If there are long breaks it makes sticking about college for later classes very difficult.* (THFG1: 6)

These gaps may discourage students from coming to campus, or staying for later sessions. The organisation of the timetable and institutional attendance policies are discussed below in the 'organisational issues' sub-section.

Tiredness and lack of time impact on studying and success

Students feel that commuting has a negative impact on their studying by reducing the time available for studying, and due to the tiredness caused by travelling.

> *Less time spent on my studies and assignments due to travel.* (THFG 2: 14)

> *The additional hours of expected study outside of college is good but sometimes is just not achievable for commuters as so much time is lost travelling.* (THFG2: 15)

The tiredness caused by long commutes impacts on studying and on study success. For example:

> *Impacts academic success by having wasted hours each day stuck on a bus or waiting for buses that get delayed or don't show up. By the time I get home I've no time or energy to do study... Have to come early and leave late to avoid traffic, buses are a shambles and waste valuable time that I could be doing my college work sitting on the bus.* (THFG1: 5)

> *I would say mostly negatively as commuting means you can be very tired for the day, personally I have to get up so early and I arrive home so late I can be tired during classes which reduces my ability to focus. There is also the loss of time, during commuting. I can't do college work as there is no space so I'm losing out on time I could be studying or doing college work. Also if there is any problem with public transport and I miss a lecture there is no way of getting to attend that class.* (THFG2: 15)

The discussion on attendance and tiredness point to important organisational issues within HEIs.

Organisational issues

There is a widespread feeling amongst the research participants that HEIs are not organised with commuter students in mind, but rather organised for people who live near the HEI, and with little or no use of online learning and support. This was such a common theme that speaks to the discussion about 'institutional responses' in section 3 of this report.

> *There's really been not a single adjustment in my college during my course of study so I would say it's affected me a lot but I just have to deal with it.* (THFG2: 4)

> *Negatively. No flexibility to support students who are commuting.* (THFG1: 2)

> *Education is tailored to people who are close to the campus or who live on campus. They seem to forget that some people are commuting over 2 hours to just get to class.* (THFG2: 13)

The key issues identified were the fragmented timetables, the lack of flexible ways of engaging and the rigidity of the attendance policies.

> *Timetable more focused on people who live near the college campus.* (THFG2: 9)

> *It has fixed timetables that are not flexible enough to accommodate commuter students. [There is] no online support for the classes missed.* (THFG1: 14)

> *5-day week- although classes could be arranged to fit into a 4 day week, the college has not made efforts to do this.* (THFG1: 12)

> *I believe that the way the schedules are organized do not have much leeway to commuters, or take it into consideration to offer online lectures in cases of buses being cancelled or being out due to a storm or even the fact that bus fares have increased and some students might not afford to pay for it on some days. Not everyone has access to a personal vehicle and most students have part-time jobs.* (THFG 2: 8)

More specifically, students identify issues that have already been mentioned: teaching being spread over four or five days per week, large gaps in timetables and lectures starting early and finishing late.

> *I think days with only one or two lectures and labs can feel like a full day as I travel for 1.5hrs up to college and 1.5hrs home for the sake of 1/2hrs.* (THFG1: 13)

> *If we're in until 6, I am not going to get work done and a proper sleep schedule in if I have a 9am the next day. It's unachievable.* (THFG 2: 7)

While the timetables are clearly an area for consideration, attention is drawn by staff and students to expectations about attendance, which again do not take into account the realities of commuter students' lives. They also point to the limited use of online lectures and resources to support blended learning.

> *Have unfair expectations put on commuter students in regard to their attendance. There is no empathy towards the students when faced with issues out of their control.* (THFG1: 14)

> *Unfair expectation on commuting students -roll call for mandatory classes doesn't take into account the commute challenges.* (THFG1: 11, staff)

> *Attendance should not be mandatory. Online lectures [should be used].* (THFG2: 12)

Indeed, there appears to be very little use of online learning and resources to support students who are not able to attend in person.

> *Lectures must be taken in place and not online. This is not accommodating for commuter students.* (THFG1: 12)

> *Lack of e-material such as recording lectures.* (THFG1: 5)

In the discussions and individual responses other ways in which the HEIs do not seem to be organising learning to enable commuters are identified. For example, one student (THFG1: 4) mentions that course assessments need to be handed in in-person, which is much more challenging for commuter students compared to those who live on campus or locally. Another student commented that they are not able to use available spaces on campus for studying or socialising (THFG2: 13).

In this section the 'organisation' of the HEIs is shown to be unaccommodating of commuter students. In the next section staff attitudes and institutional culture are considered: staff do not appear to be not fully aware of or supportive towards commuter students. These two discussions very much accord with the need for a whole provider approach to enabling and engaging commuter students.

Staff attitudes and institutional culture

In the THFGs there is a view that some staff are understanding and 'make allowances' for commuter students, while some are either unaware or deliberately obstructive. It's really encouraging to note the positive comments:

> *My lecturers have always been understanding for people commuting, and if they need to leave 10 mins early to catch the hourly bus.* (THFG2: 7)

> *Staff try to be lenient, especially if you have to leave a few minutes early to make it for the bus. They are understanding if you are late etc.* (THFG2: 8)

> *Most staff members are good about it, not minding too much when people are late, and during the instances when I have missed classes due to*

> *public transport and another class is having the lab at another time allowing me to attend it.* (THFG2: 15)

A staff member who attended a THFG exemplified the supportive staff within HEIs:

> *Public transport issues are a major problem here locally - buses being full, coming late or not coming at all. This situation is getting worse and I do feel very sorry for commuter students and for the issues facing them.* (THFG1: 8, staff)

But as some students commented, attitudes vary between staff:

> *Some staff treat us well. Giving us a bit of leeway with deadlines etc. Some don't care about our commute times.* (THFG2: 13)

> *I think for the most part lecturers are very good [and] accommodate students in [HEI3]. Some lecturers will put classes online to accommodate commuters if there's a long break. However other lecturers are the opposite and under the impression that this isn't their problem.* (THFG1: 13)

The ways in which staff do not appear to be facilitating commuter students to succeed vary. As the student above goes on to explain, some staff deliberately and blatantly seek to disadvantage students who are not there or arrive late or leave early.

> *One of my lecturers only puts up half the notes online so that people who miss a class miss these notes. Another lecturer uses passwords for each set of lecture notes and gives the password in class. This makes it very stressful and frustrating to try to get these passwords or notes off classmates.* (THFG1: 13)

Staff actions may simply reflect a lack of appreciation of the challenges that commuter students experience, especially in relation to unintentionally arriving late, or needing to leave early. In this example staff feel that students leaving early are disruptive to other class members, and may ask students either not to attend, or to stay and miss their bus home.

> *...still plenty of lecturers who don't understand the fact that we need to leave early to catch our bus and it often upsets them. They either ask us to just not show up to class as it will distract others or stay and miss the bus.* (THFG2: 4)

A related issue is about not recognising or acknowledging the importance of sessions beginning and ending on time.

> *Little regard given to commuters in regards to commuting and time keeping.* (THFG1: 3)

An example was given of one-to-one feedback sessions that overran, and a commuter student felt that they were in a difficult situation which staff did not appreciate or respond positively to.

> *Last semester, we had classes that were 1 on 1 feedback sessions. I had a 5-6 pm session and he was running an hour behind. I left before I had the chance to get the feedback because I would have gotten home extremely late.* (THFG2: 7)

This lack of recognition or appreciation of commuters' circumstances can make students feel like 'outcasts' or to reduce their sense of belonging:

> *More negatively seen as an outcast compared to students who live on campus or near campus.* (THFG1:2)

And some students feel that staff may perceive them as less engaged, due to their attendance constraints in academic and wider student experience activities:

> *Perception of engagement - staff may view commuter students as less engaged in lectures if they skip them (due to travel time/cost/only 1 or 2 lectures that day) or do not sign up for clubs & societies.* (THFG1: 12)

Overall there are clearly staff who empathise with commuter students and seek to accommodate their needs. Unlike in the UK research (Thomas & Jones 2017) there were no examples of staff deliberately humiliating or locking students out for arriving late. However, there are staff who do not understand or empathise with commuters, and some examples of how staff intentionally or unintentionally disadvantage commuter students. These experiences again point to a lack of institutional awareness and compassion for commuter students, and the need for a culture shift to address these issues.

6.3 Wider engagement

This section focuses on commuter students' wider engagement with higher education, beyond their learning experience. In particular, students discussed informal socialising with friends and participation in organised activities (e.g. sports clubs and student societies), both of which were impacted negatively by being a commuter student. Several students said they had no social life within the HEI, or it was severely impacted:

> *The social side of college is non-existent, I have to arrange transport because trains stop at a certain time.* (THFG2: 7)

> *Negatively, makes socialising more difficult as there are restrictive bus times, and further distances to travel to get home.* (THFG1: 7)

Students felt in particular that they were unable to engage in many of the organised activities as they take place in the evenings (this was discussed in both THFGs, and brought up in lots of individual comments, e.g.THFG1:4, THFG1:6, THFG 2:9). Not being able to participate in formal or organised social activities means that students are less likely to make friends, and so less able to socialise whilst on campus.

> *…less likely to make friends as social events may run after public transport is available such as parties organised by student union or events organised by clubs & societies.* (THFG1: 12)

While transport links make it difficult for some commuter students to participate in evening activities, there are some institutional organisational issues – beyond activities being organised in the evening - that hamper engagement. For example, not being able to park overnight on campus, and the closure of food outlets on campus.

> *Negatively socially, can't park overnight so even if I had a place to stay I can't go out very often.* (THFG1: 5)

> *Food places close early which can affect students that may want to study at the library after lectures.* (THFG1: 12)

Overall commuter students were largely resigned to having very little engagement in the wider student experience, as they found it sufficiently challenging to engage with their taught sessions and find time and energy for their independent learning. This largely mirrors findings from earlier studies in the UK, where students talked about 'being happy just doing the work' and using their time more 'wisely' (Thomas 2018, 2020) and their desire to become a graduate rather than to be a student (Thomas 2023). In the English study a dichotomy could be detected: some students extolled the benefits of being a commuter student and not being 'distracted' by an active social life (perhaps imagined in exaggerated terms) as this would allow them achieve a 'good degree' and secure a 'graduate job', while others lamented not being able participate in a more ludic student experience. Students in the Irish study however seemed more stoical. The importance of peer interaction and socialisation, and also engagement in activities that develop employability skills in the widest sense should not be underestimated. Studying informally with peers contributes to academic success (Thomas, 2012) and engagement in wider activities contributes to successful progression into the labour market (Stuart et al 2011). This lack of engagement by the majority of commuter students may contribute to lower outcomes for commuter students in comparison to peers who live on or near campus.

7. Suggested improvements

This final section on the findings from the THFGs focuses on the improvements or changes that commuter students would like to see. It is organised into the commute including financial support, extra buses and car sharing, the academic experience including staff and cultural issues and organisational issues and the wider student experience.

7.1 The commute

Many students commute in Ireland due to a lack of availability and affordability of accommodation, rather than explicitly to save money or to benefit from remaining in the family locale and community. It is not surprising therefore that for some students the best solution is for the 'university to provide accommodation nearby' (THFG2: 12) and suggestions such as the HEI should 'advocate for more affordable student accommodation and housing' (THFG1: 7). HEIs are aware of this issue, but in the immediate few years many students will need to continue to commute, and indeed the situation may get worse: 'The issues facing commuting students are only going to worsen in coming years' (THFG1: 8 staff). Student participants made a range of suggestions that would support them with the travelling itself.

- Financial support to help with transport costs and food on campus
- Increase the number of buses, or provide private buses between HEIs and transport hubs or popular commuter locations
- Encouragement and support for car sharing

Financial support

Students find travelling by car or public transport expensive, and this is exacerbated by the frequency with which they have to travel to campus. They also noted that food is expensive on campus, and long commuting times leaves insufficient time to prepare food at home (either to eat there or to bring onto campus), and so they would like additional financial support for commuter students.

> *Financial support for public transport, help organising buses from popular commuting areas, carpool.* (THFG1: 4)

> *Maybe having some sort of Grant or subsidy for students for the amount spent on transport or even for lunches at college. If you get home late from commuting, you might not always have the energy to make a lunch for the next day or if you have to wait around at college for longer waiting for transport you need to eat more while at college rather than at home. Maybe even introducing a breakfast scheme for people who have to get up early at like 5 a.m. as mentioned in the group as they won't be hungry at*

time but should have something to eat before starting classes as they have a long day and buying it at college will cost them more. (THFG2: 15)

Offer student discounts with local garages. Every little helps! (THFG2: 16)

Buses

Around 40% of students travel by public transport (HEA 2023) and in our study around 40% travel by bus. In the THFG discussions students explained how the bus times do not align with the lecture times, and this often results in students either leaving sessions early, or having long waits. Students therefore would like better alignment between the teaching timetables and bus timetables.

Overcrowding on public transport creates delays as people can't always get on, or they leave lectures early to ensure they are in the queue for the bus. Furthermore, overcrowded transport makes it difficult for students to study while travelling. There are calls for more public buses, or for HEIs to lay on private buses particularly to transport hubs or popular commuter locations.

Increase bus routes and frequency of buses. (THFG2: 13).

Getting in contact with the bus services to increase the number of buses or routes, as when complaints are made to the bus services they say the college/student union need to be the ones to say it. (THFG2: 15)

College funded bus services to get students to and from stations reliably and on time. (THFG2: 1)

Setting up maybe shuttle services to areas where large amount of students commute from such as the cities could reduce commuting time waiting for buses and reduce the number of people who can't do work as they are standing on buses or can't get on the bus as it's too full. (THFG2: 15)

Private buses from large commuter towns to college would be a great investment. I live in the largest commuter town in [HEI3 region] with a growing young population, and there is only one public bus to HEI3 every morning. It's also always completely full as it serves the city and [HEI3] too. Because of this, there is little availability on the bus and it can take up to 2 hours to reach the university as it is not fully direct. Additionally, this bus is supposed to be discontinued in the revamp of the bus system. There would be huge benefit and demand to have a private bus organised by the university to commuter students. (THFG1: 10)

Car sharing

In the first THFG there was discussion about the idea of carpooling groups on campus to enable student travel from popular destinations to the campus. This would reduce the travel and parking costs to individuals, and reduce the number of vehicles on the road and looking for parking at the HEI. This could be incentivised with priority parking (e.g. a guaranteed space, or access to more convenient car parks) for people car sharing.

7.2 Academic experience

Many of the changes that students would like to see in Irish higher education relate to improving the academic experience for commuter students. Such changes might then mitigate some of the challenges with the commute itself. Students made recommendations relating to timetabling, online learning resources and attendance, assessment deadlines, provision of academic support and the need for staff development to create a more commuter compassionate academic experience.

While there are no straight forward solutions to enhancing the academic experience, there is an overall demand for a 'commuter compassionate' approach. Drawing on a scoping review to clarify the concept of compassionate pedagogy, Killingback et al (2024) find that there is not a single definition, but their synthesis identifies four key elements or stages: noticing suffering, distress or disadvantage in the learning environment; a commitment to address or mitigate the suffering, distress, or disadvantage; the promotion of wellbeing and flourishing; and a concern for the whole student as a person beyond the cognitive role of education alone. This project predominantly contributes to raising awareness of the challenges commuter students face, and these suggestions indicate ways in which HEIs could mitigate their distress and disadvantages and contribute to their wellbeing and flourishing. Some may also contribute to the wider success of commuter students.

Organisational issues: Timetabling and attendance

Students would like to see changes to the timetable and to the attendance policy, and this would support their academic success.

> *If the schedule was constructed in a way that commuter students were considered as well, I believe that nothing would hinder their success*. (THFG2: 8)

> *Attendance should not impact your performance. Online lectures should be promoted*. (THFG2: 11)

One student made a heartfelt plea to create a more commuter compassionate timetable, and also noted that until this is in place, it is not viable to consider engagement in the wider student experience.

> *Revamp of the timetable: I already have such issues balancing my academic life with my need to work a job, and a big issue facing this is in the large gaps in the timetable. I have a day where I have a 7-hour gap between classes, and it becomes difficult to fit this into my work schedule. I often end up missing classes as a result if they are only an hour long, as it doesn't seem worthwhile if I could be working instead, when I take my long commute into account. It is so difficult to even manage academics as a commuter student, that there is not even any time to consider additional opportunities. First, we need to tackle this issue before students feel that they have the time to commit to other activities, and I believe the timetable is the first big issue to fix.* (THFG1: 10)

Students identified a range of timetable changes that would facilitate engagement, such as “no 9 am starts”, “a more condensed timetable”, and “no really long breaks between taught sessions”. While it would be impossible to accommodate all commuter students’ different preferences, it might be viable to develop a compassionate approach to timetabling which takes into account the different needs of this student group. One member of staff provided some practical examples of activities the offer and changes that could be made:

> *We have an "active chats" group every Thursday 8am -9am -this is attractive to commuter students as they are on campus early to avoid traffic congestion and to gain parking. Staggered start times could be an option and also look at the timing of mandatory classes. Assessment of learning…midday as opposed to a 9am which could mean commuting students are not late. (THFG1: 11 staff)*

While there are different views about the preferred start times, it would be compassionate to reduce the number of days that students are required to be on campus, limit the number of days with both early starts and late finishes, to timetable one-to-ones and small group sessions taking into account whether or not students are commuters, and arrange assessments to start later in the day to reduce the number of students who are unintentionally unavoidably late. Principles such as these could shape a commuter compassionate timetable. These suggestions were made by students:

> *Removing attendance requirements; timetable classes to be closer together; in the case of individual assessments, order the timetable to start with non-commuter students earlier in the morning.* (THFG1: 10)

> *Classes start midday 2 days a week so you do not have all 9am starts five days a week.* (THFG2: 14)

> *Maybe consider how timetables affect commuter students, such as having only one class on, means more time is spent on commuting than college work which is nonsensical. Also having timetables that finish late in the evening mean public transport is less frequent so a commute takes longer. Most buses also seem to leave on the hour so if classes finish exactly on the hour you don't have time to get to the bus, you miss the bus and have to wait in most cases another hour for the next one. Holding classes on-line as well as in-person could help for these short days.* (THFG2: 15)

> *More class-filled days leading to less days in college. No days with only 1 or 2 classes or recognition that it's acceptable not to attend those days.* (THFG1: 5)

It might be feasible for HEIs, Academic Departments, or Programmes, to organise a timetable focus group, or feedback session (THFG2: 7), and so involve commuters students in the process of advising on a suitable timetable, or principles to inform commuter compassionate timetables. Timetable preferences may be personal, but will also be influenced by factors such as where students are commuting from and what methods of transportation they are using. Thus, it might not be that there is a single solution to this challenge, but some compassionate timetabling principles, coupled with student consultation could significantly improve the commuter student experience.

Online learning resources and attendance

In addition to compassionate timetabling, it might be practicable to implement some of students' suggestions around the use of online learning resources, delivery and attendance. These solutions range from posting material on the VLE, to recording lectures and making them available online to download and watch, and hybrid delivery options for some sessions. Students felt that simply posting slides online would be advantageous to commuters, and help them to avoid missing sections of the curriculum.

> *I think staff putting all lecture slides online would really help. I think putting them up before the lecture allows the student to look at these notes during the class-time so they don't feel as though they're missing work.* (THFG1: 13)

> *More… e-learning, notes posted online, more accepting of lack of attendance without it reflecting badly on the student.* (THFG1: 5)

Other students would like lectures to be recorded and be available online, especially on days with a limited number of teaching sessions. Ideally students would like the option to join live classes online as hybrid sessions.

> *Online lectures/recorded lectures available particularly on days when only one or two are taking place.* (THFG1: 12)

> *I think there could be more support for commuter students as in most cases they have less time to study and complete reports and projects. In most cases students want to learn so having lecture topics posted online and having mixed on-line and in person classes would really help.* (THFG2: 15)

> *Hybrid/online classes or recorded with small quiz/survey at the end of group classes - and fewer days [on campus].* (THFG1: 9)

> *There should be a hybrid style to the courses much like some work places. It allows everyone to engage with lectures and labs.* (THFG2: 8)

There is not however a desire for all learning to be online, as the social dimension of learning is recognised. The option to do so some sessions remotely would really assist students who have long commutes (e.g. one to two hours or more each way):

> *The opportunity to join some classes online would be more helpful for commuter students academically, but, as a lot of the college experience is social, it might be detrimental for group cohesion and teamwork.* (THFG2: 7)

It is also not necessary to offer online attendance to all students, but only those who commute:

> *Online classes for commuter students only, so this does not affect attendance of all the [whole] class.* (THFG2: 14)

Or to make use of more blended learning and a flipped classroom, to reduce in person requirements and to increase the value of the sessions on campus:

> *Keynote lecture online before or after the weekend with small group flipped classroom onsite engagement mid-week.* (THFG2: 3, staff)

Assessment

Students suggested a more flexible, commuter student-friendly approach to assessments relating to the timetabling of in-person assessments, submission deadlines and greater use of online assessments. For example, students suggested:

> *More flexible deadlines to support students.* (THFG1:2)

To have all deadlines for assignments on weekends for commuter students. (THFG2: 14)

Both flexible deadlines and including more online learning due to timetable. (THFG1:3)

In the case of individual assessments, order the timetable to start with non-commuter students earlier in the morning. (THFG1: 10)

Online exams. (THFG1: 13)

While not all of these suggestions will be relevant to every module, course or HEI, they point to aspects of assessment practice that could be reviewed and considered in an effort to create a more commuter compassionate academic experience.

Academic support and group working

While timetabling, online learning and attendance and the timing of assessments and assessment deadlines were the main academic recommendations, students also suggested other ways in which commuters could be supported to engage. Group working was not discussed widely, but there was a suggestion that staff could do more to encourage groups of students to adopt more flexible ways or collaborating, for example engage in group work more thoroughly:

…encourage flexibility for students in group working to encourage them to use online platforms to meet as it's not always easy for commuters to travel to campus for an hour meeting. (THFG1:2)

To set up more pods to talk with your groups for group projects. (THFG2: 14)

It was also noted that sometimes feedback and support sessions are not available at times when students are available, or need them, and so there could be a flexible approach to timetabling one-to-one and small group teaching, tutoring/advising and support sessions. This might include offering sessions online and during the evenings and weekend, or between timetabled sessions when students are on campus.

Flexible timetable or allowing students to schedule their classes according to their availability. (THFG1: 14)

Offer academic support outside normal hours. (THFG1: 9)

Staff development

While some THFG participants felt that staff were aware of the realities and needs of commuter students: "I think the understanding is there" (THFG2: 8), others thought staff need to "Be more understanding" (THFG2: 11), "Be more understanding of the

difficulties commuters face" (THFG1: 3). To be more understanding was an often repeated phrase, with an emphasis on greater awareness of the realities of commuter students' lives, and supporting students in managing this complexity.

> *Just in general be more understanding and flexible of other people's commitments and life circumstances.* (THFG1: 5)

> *Understand a lot is going on not just with commuting but with other things in students' lives who may need a bit of extra time. Also being more understanding with arriving late to class as there is lots of traffic surrounding college areas that is unpredictable.* (THFG1: 6)

> *They could keep in mind the restrictions some students are under in order to get home in the evenings, and plan their curriculums around that.* (THFG1: 7)

> *Recognise who are commuter students so they are aware [it] may be difficult attending all classes.* (THFG1: 4)

> *Understand that there's more stress on commuter students, [who] are often very tired, and if cancelling a class don't do it just half an hour before scheduled time as people could already be on the way.* (THFG2: 1)

> *Support them if they can't submit work on time due to the long commute.* (THFG2: 13)

Students therefore suggested ways in which staff's knowledge and understanding about commuter students could be increased. This would include knowing more about the number of commuter students in a class (e.g. through institutional data or a class survey), and finding out about their individual experiences (e.g. through conversations and training).

> *Know the percentage of commuter students in your classes.* (THFG2: 3, staff)

> *Information on how students transport [sic] to college.* (THFG2: 9)

> *Lecturers sending a form out at the start of the year to understand who is commuting and might not attend every class.* (THFG1: 13)

> *Know who commuter students are and speak to them to find out how they can help.* (THFG1: 9)

> *Hear from commuting students -"a day in the life of a commuting student" - give a real life story.* (THFG1: 11, staff)

> *Showing understanding to commuting challenges. Staff can learn about the time and financial demands that commuting places on students.* (THFG1: 12)

> *Having information workshops to let staff know what commuter students go through. Identifying the number of commuter students within their classes and finding ways to communicate with them while finding ways to accommodate them.* (THFG1: 14)

These are fairly practical suggestions about staff having institutional information about their students or collecting information from their students. This could be combined with conversations with individual students or groups, or some form of development opportunity with input from commuter students.

7.3 Wider student experience

As discussed above, there was a level of resignation from commuter students about their inability to engage in the wider student experience, and more interest in addressing the challenges to their academic engagement. The types of solutions that students suggested were:

- Online student support services and more information about the support that is available
- Daytime events
- Alternative opportunities for engagement
- Commuter student voice and representation

Student support services

Students wanted more support services to be provided online or in flexible ways and more information about the support that is available.

> *Students should be more informed about the support available.* (THFG2: 8)

> *Being informed about the supports available to them, making more workshops available online. (THFG1: 5)*

> *Information displayed in the college regarding support available.* (THFG1: 2)

Daytime events

There was general agreement that daytime activities and clubs would be desirable and enable more commuters to engage.

> *Holding events in late afternoon rather than later in the evening or holding events at multiple different times to allow different groups of students to participate.* (THFG1: 10)

> *Allow for events to take place from an earlier time.* (THFG2: 4)

> *Having clubs have during the day times and evening times…Making more opportunities of timetabling events and classes in slots that may reach commuter students more.* (THFG1: 6)

> *I volunteer during the day for the college book club as the chairperson, but I feel we can't do events passed 6pm because some of us commute.* (THFG2: 7)

Alternative opportunities for engagement

But there were also suggestions that students should be facilitated to engage within the communities they live and online.

> *Help them find programs in their local area.* (THFG2: 8)

> *Collaborations with other colleges e.g. to provide access to areas to study, workshops etc.* (THFG1: 12)

> *Leadership and volunteering are available in local communities and can be arranged and reviewed from a distance. Engagement with peers can be online as can access to support services.* (THFG2: 3, staff)

> *Having the opportunity to engage with community opportunities online would certainly help more people get involved, but really there should be more opportunity to live on campus or nearby.* (THFG1: 7)

One suggestion from a member of staff suggested a re-organisation of the academic year to give students more time to engage in the wider student experience:

> *It seems that the academic year is condensed down to 2 semesters of 13 weeks each (at our HEI) -it leads to time poor students whereby students simply don't have the time to engage. Maybe it's time to look outside the 13 weeks and look at the weeks outside of these.* (TFG1: 11 staff)

Commuter student voice and representation

A theme that emerged throughout the THFGs was appreciation from commuter students about having been given an opportunity to talk about their experience, or 'a voice' and a desire for more commuter student representation. This was largely seen as a role for students' unions.

The student union [should] become more engaged with the college life academically and travel of the people instead of events and social activities. (THFG2: 14)

Maybe setting up a commuter group or union where students could raise issues and problems, to lessen the pressure on the individual student. (THFG2: 15)

I think having a specific officer for commuters, to help them if there's any enquiries. I think if more things were on during the day, it would allow more engagement and socialising with peers. (THFG1: 13)

8. Student priorities for change

This section of the findings draws from the commuter student jurors' recommendations. The jurors were instructed to consider:

- Changes HEIs should make to enable commuter students to engage and succeed immediately (e.g. this academic year).
- Changes HEIs should make before the start of the next academic year.
- Changes HEIs should consider in the longer-term.

In this project there was no gap between the THFGs and the commuter student jurors' 'deliberation'. If a similar research method was to be used in the future it would be more effective if the long list of suggestions (i.e. the ideas in section 7) were collated and shared with jurors to inform their discussion. In addition 'expert witnesses' could be called to provide examples from other contexts of the proposed changes or interventions and further evidence of effectiveness and impact. In this project the process was less well-informed by the THFG suggestions and there was limited reflection and discussion (perhaps as people were tired after the THFG, which was long and intense). The priorities for each THFG commuter student jury for the short-term (e.g. this/next academic year) and the longer term are presented here, and they inform the recommendations in the final chapter of this report.

8.1 Quick wins

THFG1

1. Carpooling groups, facilitated by a WhatsApp group.
2. Audio recording of lectures and posted on the VLE.
3. Commuter student forum or similar to give students a voice.
4. Raising staff awareness about commuter students through staff development activities, ideally led by commuter students.

THFG 2

1. Transport shuttle service between transport hubs and HEI site(s).
2. Student union commuter student advisory board to give commuter students a voice.
3. More jobs for commuter students on campus to help make trips to campus more worthwhile and reduce the need to be at home for employment.
4. Cheaper/subsidised food on campus.
5. Financial support for commuter students.
6. Flexible, part-time accommodation options to allow commuter students to stay on campus.

8.2 Longer-term priorities

THFG1

1. Understanding the commuter student population: including information such as how many students commute, where they travel from, the distance and time travelled, and their reasons for commuting. This information could initially be collected via survey and subsequently built into the enrolment process. It would be useful to categorise commuter students into local students and those who travel from further away.
2. Developing staff via a workshop about the general commuter issues, and encouraging them to find out about their commuter student population and consider how to address issues. This builds on the awareness raising in the quick wins section and moves towards staff taking action.
3. Student voice and representation: this could include continuing to operate a commuter student forum, but finding ways to make this more sustainable and to have greater impact, for example by creating an elected post within the student union to represent commuter students in HEI decision making.
4. Reviewing the teaching, learning and assessment strategy, including mandatory attendance, recordings and timetabling and scheduling to provide a student experience that is commuter compassionate.
5. Increase the quantity of student accommodation on or near the HEI and improve transportation links relating to timetable alignment and the number of services provided to reduce overcrowding.

THFG 2

1. Develop a timetable that condenses some of the teaching sessions into fewer days on campus, and combine in-person teaching with online sessions, to facilitate better engagement by commuter students. Ideally this would be three or four in-person days and one or two days online.

2. Develop a commuter-friendly timetable, for example, not combining early starts and late finishes on consecutive days, and starting and finishing at times that align with the bus timetables e.g. starting at 9.30am and finishing at 4.30pm to enable students to catch 5pm buses home.
3. Allowing students to have a say in their timetable, for example to select seminar options, or to select modules that have teaching on days they are on campus.
4. Facilitate students to travel by addressing safety and security issues, such as carparks, footpaths and shortcuts.
5. Help students with the cost of travel through things like a bicycle or motorcycle rental scheme, or a loan scheme to buy cheaper transport solutions such as travel cards, bicycles and to pay for emergency car repairs.

In summary, the commuter student jurors' priorities should inform HEI decision-making, but this should not ignore the wider lists of suggestions put forward during the THFGs. The idea of identifying more immediate and longer-term priorities was quite challenging for the jurors in terms of having a good understanding of the practicalities and timelines of change within HEIs. These priorities have been considered in this context.

9. Conclusions and implications

9.1 Summary of the commuter student experience

This study has demonstrated that commuting is essential for many students studying at HEIs in Ireland. Commuting is sometimes undertaken to save money, to retain a part-time job, or to meet a family commitment, but for many students commuting is necessary due to lack of suitable accommodation in the vicinity of their HEI. Students were generous with their time and shared many details about their commuting and student experience and made many suggestions about improvements that HEIs could make.

In summary, Irish students found few advantages and many challenges associated with commuting. Students are commuting via a range of modes of transport; the majority are required to be on campus four or five times per week; and many have long commutes (see also Cullinan 2023). The logistics of travelling are tiring and troublesome, and this has knock-on effects on students' concentration, independent study time and wellbeing. Commuting is also expensive. These practical challenges are compounded by HEI timetables, attendance policies, limited use of the VLE and in some cases staff attitudes. There is a strong sense that HEIs are set up for 'on-campus' students, and there is little or no recognition of commuter students. There appears to be very little engagement in the wider student experience by commuter students, and a resignation to this, because at the moment their time and energy is devoted to attending academic

sessions and completing their independent study. This aligns with findings from England that commuter students often saw themselves as 'good students' oriented towards getting a 'good degree' and a graduate job (Thomas 2023).

This lack of recognition and proactive integration of commuter students is reflected in the snapshot of HEI websites. The majority of HEI websites do not explicitly mention or recognise commuting as a legitimate way of engaging. Some HEIs provide travel or parking information, and better institutions reference the VLE or online library support, but overall there is little information about flexible or blended courses for full-time undergraduate students and learning and teaching policies do not refer to commuter students or online or hybrid learning options. In terms of the wider student experience most HEI websites provide information about accommodation and relocating to study, while some provide travel information but little reassurance about commuting. Indeed, commuter students, or students who live locally, were very poorly represented on these HEI websites that were reviewed. There appear to be no social opportunities that have been designed with commuter students in mind – or transportation or accommodation provision to enable them to participate in activities in the evenings and weekends. No particular HEI has the best website, rather there are various examples of good practice, and each website reviewed had omissions too. This review suggests institutional inconsistency in their positionality towards commuter students, on the one hand relying on students commuting to campus and on the other not recognising how their own institutional policies, organisation, culture and assumptions position commuters as 'other'; this undermines or invalidates commuting as an acceptable and normal way of engaging with HE. It also contributes to an environment where commuter students are less able to engage academically, develop themselves more widely and maximise their potential gains from HE. In this context students have identified many changes that would support commuter students to attend, engage and thrive within HE.

9.2 Using the WPA to critique institutional provision for commuter students

This study's positionality is that HEIs need to change, rather than only requiring (commuter) students to adapt and change, and it is informed by the whole provider approach (Thomas 2017, 2024b). The research suggests that to date there has been very little deliberate or explicit adaptation of HEIs to the needs of commuter students, despite recognition of an acute national shortage of student accommodation (see for example 'editorials' in the Irish Times, 26th August 2025). In this sub-section of the conclusion, the WPA model discussed in section 3.3 is used to identify the strengths and gaps in relation to the engagement of commuter students. The model requires an inclusive student experience, situated within an enabling environment that recognises and facilitates the experiences and requirements of commuter students.

Inclusive student experience

The key elements of an inclusive student experience were summarised in section 3.3. The qualitative research with commuter students and a few staff suggests that the student experience is not currently inclusive of commuter students.

The study presents valuable evidence that the academic experience is designed with minimal regard for commuter students, with the timetable usually spread over four or five days, little or no use of online learning, limited or deliberately hindering use of the VLE and strict attendance requirements. These reports from the 'ground' are supported by the review of institutional websites. While the majority of HEIs appear to offer online or blended programmes, which would be attractive to many commuter students, in reality there are very few or no full-time blended learning undergraduate programmes on offer at most institutions. Furthermore, various institutional strategies do not reference commuter students, and none of the institutional learning and teaching or education policies explicitly mention commuter students (or local or live-at-home students) or include policies or approaches that would particularly benefit commuter students. Students reported a range of staff attitudes towards commuter students. While some staff are accommodating, students also felt that they were penalised by staff who reprimanded them for arriving late, would not let them leave early, or made it difficult for them to catch up on missed sessions.

Students themselves report finding it difficult to engage in the wider student experience, both enhancement activities and formal and informal social activities. This is largely due to the organisation of the timetable and these other activities and poor alignment with travel arrangements. Students find themselves needing to be on campus for the majority of the week; this leaves them tired and with little inclination to engage more widely in student life. Academic timetables do not align with public transport timetables, and so students sometimes leave the last session of the day early, or have to wait considerable time for the next bus or train. Most of the organised activities are in the evening, and participating in these would involve waiting on campus for the activities to start and having to then travel home late, and when they have to get up again early the next morning, this is not feasible for many students. Whilst waiting on campus - in the morning before classes begin, between taught sessions, before transport arrives or for evening activities – there is a lack of facilities. Students would benefit from spaces to wait and relax, places to store possessions and opportunities to eat affordable, healthy and culturally acceptable food.

Thus, it is not possible to conclude that the HEIs involved in this study are inclusive of commuter students. It should of course be noted that we have not undertaken a deep dive into specific HEIs, but the review of websites and THFG participants from a range of institutions would lead us to conclude that most institutions are not inclusive.

Enabling environment

The enabling environment is understood as the institutional conditions that facilitate and promote an inclusive student experience. The review of websites in general and institutional policies that were available in particular suggests that there is a lack of institutional and senior leadership commitment to commuter students, or at the very least this is not clearly communicated and demonstrated in the 'presentation' of most HEIs through their websites and strategic documents, such as visions or plans and education and equality, diversity and inclusion policies. Commuter students are largely explicitly and implicitly absent in the contents of websites and texts of institutional documents.

This lack of institutional recognition of and commitment to commuter students feeds into the 'structure' of the institution. Policies and processes, such as timetabling, attendance, use of the VLE, provision of support, organisation of the wider student experience and student representation do not seem to prioritise or recognise commuter students, and many seem to actively disadvantage them. Students also report poor communication to them, for example about the support that is available, and internally with groups such as teaching staff about numbers and experiences of commuter students and estates management about space and catering needs, and externally with transportation companies, for example to align timetables or to respond to the overcrowding of buses.

Similarly, the 'culture' of the HEIs is not permeated by empathy towards and validation of commuter students. There are clearly staff who are understanding, and take steps to support commuter students, but there are others who do not, and this is reinforced by the institutional processes that do not require staff to have awareness, commitment and skills to ensure the inclusion of commuter students. There also appears to be acceptance by students themselves of the 'outcast' position of commuter students, and resignation that they have to get by and make the best of it. Commuter students want to have a voice, to be seen and to be included, and would like fora or representation to help them to use their experiences to inform institutional decision making.

The THFGs demonstrated that there are no national or institutional definitions of commuter students and data is not widely collected about commuter student status, other characteristics, experiences and outcomes (the HEA student accommodation survey does collect some relevant data, but this is not sufficient). Students would like staff to know both how many commuter students are in their classes, but also to find out about their experiences and needs, to raise awareness amongst staff and increase their ability to make changes. Students would also like to feedback on their experiences and inform institutional development. All of this points to the need for greater use of

data, evidence, evaluation and learning to inform and underpin national and institutional work to improve the experiences and outcomes of commuter students.

9.3 Implications for Ireland

The study is modest but it has used qualitative evidence to shine a light on the experiences of commuter students and to suggest that HEIs, regions and national organisations and policy makers need to do much more to address the commuter student crisis. It can be argued that it is not feasible for HEIs to 'fix' the student accommodation shortage and that the problem has persisted for years, but it is possible for HEIs, representative bodies, partners and policy makers to substantially improve the commuter student experience. And, as was mentioned in THFG1, it needs to be led from the top down:

> *It needs to come from top down so from president down to heads of department to the lecturers. As some heads of department are old style.* (THFG1: 2)

In fact it is necessary to have a 'top-down, bottom-up' approach (Kift 2009), where the institutional leadership and commitment and the structural features of the national system and HEIs set the strategic direction for the sector, and the staff and students have the commitment and skills to enact this in their daily delivery and engagement within the HEI. This report should act as a catalyst for change, to spark further research with students and staff, data analysis, policy development and evaluated pilot interventions to bring about change. The next section provides recommendations for different stakeholder groups and time periods.

10. Recommendations

10.1 National policy makers and representative organisations

The first two (a & b) and the last (i) recommendations should happen as soon as possible, while the other recommendations may need a longer time frame or need to be piloted in particular regions or HEIs.

a. Recognise the poor experience of the many commuter students in the Irish HE system and commit to change.
b. Initiate a discussion of 'commuter student' terminology in Ireland and agree a definition - ideally with classification to recognise the multiplicity of types of commuters.
c. Develop national tools to record and monitor commuter students, including numbers, commuting characteristics, intersectional factors and educational

outcomes. Build commuter student data collection into existing national data collection tools.

d. Produce data about commuter students in HEIs and regions.
e. Identify policy opportunities and levers to encourage HEIs to make changes to the accessibility of their teaching and learning provision to commuter students and to improve student engagement and success.
f. Identify policy opportunities and levers to encourage HEIs to make changes to improve the financial and personal wellbeing of commuter students.
g. Identify national policy opportunities to improve the financial situation of individual commuter students.
h. Identify policy opportunities and levers to encourage regional collaboration between HEIs and with transport providers.
i. Continue to advocate an increased support of affordable student accommodation, especially in regions with the most acute problems.

10.2 Quick wins for HEIs

While the study has uncovered the need for some fundamental changes within HEIs, this list of 'quick wins' may be a good starting point for institutions. The list could be used as the basis for an 'audit' of existing practice and to identify some changes that could be implemented relatively quickly.

a. Make commuter students visible on the website, e.g. welcome students to the institution rather than the area; include information about travel as well as accommodation; include commuter student stories about studying and engaging in wider activities; provide tailored FAQs.
b. Explicitly welcome commuter students to the HEI during induction to validate commuter experiences and celebrate what they contribute, e.g. knowledge of the area; links to the community and region; time management and organisational skills.
c. Create a point of contact for commuter students and encourage commuter students to identify themselves to the HEI. This will facilitate the provision of information and support about travelling, studying and wider engagement, and they could be alerted directly about class cancellations etc.
d. Encourage commuter students to get to know each other so that they can travel together, car share, and meet on campus or in their local area.
e. Identify and promote a lounge or space for commuter students to spend time, store belongings, charge electronic devices, and consider providing a breakfast or lunch for commuters.
f. Identify programmes with particularly high numbers of commuter students and develop a commuter 'compassionate' timetable.

g. Organise staff training to raise awareness of commuters' experiences, and encourage and support staff to find out about their commuter students.
h. Help teaching staff to acknowledge the existence of commuters in their classes, discuss their experiences, and make adjustments, e.g. anticipating some late arrivals; providing recordings or summaries online; using the online learning tools to facilitate engagement before, during and after teaching.
i. Develop guidance for group working using online platforms to encourage inclusion of commuter students.
j. Work with the Students' Union to organise (additional) day-time activities, to set up a commuter-led group, or to deliver society talks and meetings online.
k. Ensure the institutional policy allows for and encourages the provision of one-to-one tutoring and student support via online platforms and at flexible times.
l. Find ways to allow commuter students to be heard and to shape institutional decision making. For example, develop a hybrid commuter student forum to meet others, raise issues of concern, provide representation, hear commuter student voices and generate an action plan.

10.3 Teaching Tips: How to be more 'commuter compassionate' in your teaching and student support practices

This report has identified and acknowledged the importance of leadership to bring about institutional change, but staff at the 'chalkface' delivering teaching, tutoring and support directly to students are vital to changing aspects of the day-to-day experience of commuter students. These tips for teaching and support were developed in response to feedback about things not being within the control of some staff groups. They could also be used to inform institutional or departmental training for staff. Commuter-inclusive language: When welcoming new students to your teaching session, programme or department, use commuter inclusive language: remember that not all students moved into new accommodation, are living on their own for the first time or are new to the city or region. But they will all be new to your session, programme, department and HEI.

a. Talk about commuting: Talk to your teaching groups and to individual students about commuting. A quick show of hands: who is living on campus, who is living locally, who is commuting from home? Or, a question about practical arrangements in a supervision session could be useful. When asking questions about practical issues and wellbeing, don't just refer to living away from home, moving into new accommodation and making new friends - consider also travel, parking, and balancing study requirements with commuting and other commitments.
b. Commuter student community: Encourage students who are commuting to find out where they are each commuting from and to think about sharing lifts or travelling

together, meeting up before teaching sessions (they often arrive early to secure parking etc), or meeting up in their local areas.

c. Commuters can enrich the cohort experience: Recognise the benefits that commuters have and bring to the student cohort, for example, time management and organisational skills, knowledge of the area (e.g. best places to socialise or special offers and places to visit), and links to the community and region for other opportunities such as volunteering, employment, placements, or undertaking dissertation research.
d. Know what support is available and tell commuters about it: Find out what your HEI has to offer and signpost commuter students to the support that's available. Look for tailored information and support for commuter students, but also travelling and parking information, eating on campus, spaces for relaxation and to store belongings, access to a fridge, a kettle or microwave, and places where phones and other devices can be plugged in and charged up. Information about the VLE, online communication platforms and daytime activities may also be useful.
e. Be compassionate if commuters are late or need to leave early: Give consideration to the fact that if students arrive late this may not be due to disorganisation, but to unavoidable travel delays. Preventing them from entering a teaching session, or just drawing attention to late arrivals and potentially humiliating them, can be upsetting for students. Similarly, consider whether finishing on time or even early at the end of the day would be feasible, as it could make a big difference to commuters.
f. Support engagement beyond the classroom through the VLE: Use the VLE to support commuter students by ensuring that the slides are available in advance and that the recordings are available to be viewed after the teaching session. You might also include a summary of a seminar discussion or a link to an online lab tutorial for students who were not able to attend in-person. Use the VLE tools to facilitate engagement before, during and after teaching.
g. Enable inclusive group work: Encourage and help student group work to be inclusive, e.g. meeting when everyone is on campus, using an online platform for online or hybrid meetings, or allocating work that plays to each other's strengths and access to resources. Commuters may want to undertake group work and independent study together using an online platform.
h. Schedule assessments and exams to accommodate commuters: Think about the timing of assessments and exams that you can control - an early start or late finish may unintentionally disadvantage commuter students.
i. Be compassionate and flexible when you can: Provide flexibility in the scheduling of personal tutor sessions and other one-to-one meetings, e.g. offering days and times adjacent to taught sessions, or offering an online option.
j. Embed co-curricular and social activities into your teaching: Try to build additional activities into teaching time, rather than outside of the timetable. Alternatively, organise co-curricular, professional development and course-related social

activities during the day when commuters are on campus, or provide the opportunity to participate remotely.

k. Communicate changes and cancellations compassionately: Think about how you communicate with all students, but especially commuters, about changes or the cancellation of teaching sessions etc. Commuters often need the information earlier than students based on or near campus and they may not have access to their HEI email whilst travelling. You could state at the start of the year that if a class is to be cancelled or changed, that the information will be available via a particular communication channel by a specific time to help commuters plan ahead and not make a wasted journey.

10.4 Address commuter students via the institutional website

The review of websites suggested that commuter students may not be addressed, represented and supported via the information that presented. These recommendations can be used to review and update institutional websites.

a. Welcome students to the institution, rather than the city or area.
b. Provide information about travel as well as accommodation.
c. Highlight courses or features of learning that allow students to study flexibly.
d. Provide information about how independent learning is supported, e.g. by the VLE, online learning communities and the library resources for students not based on campus.
e. Provide details of how campus support services can be accessed remotely (e.g. online, via email or in other locations).
f. Identify daytime, weekend or online clubs and societies that commuters might want to join.
g. Showcase opportunities beyond the HEI, for example local sports teams, volunteering opportunities or study spaces around the HEI and in locations where commuters live.
h. Include information about services and spaces that support commuter students (perhaps through a dedicated page).
i. Include commuter student stories about studying and engaging in wider activities.
j. Develop tailored FAQs for commuter students.

10.5 More significant changes for HEIs

The study identified more fundamental changes that need to be made by HEIs. This section summarises the key issues identified. These are likely to be more challenging to implement than the 'quick wins', and so will require institutional commitment and leader and may need to be planned well in advance.

a. Agree an institutional definition and classification of ‘commuter students’.

b. Collect or extract institutional data about commuter students. This might include numbers in each educational unit, commuting characteristics, intersectional factors and educational outcomes. Build commuter student data collection into existing institutional data collection tools.

c. Produce accessible data about commuter students for staff in a range of roles within your HEI and train staff how to use the data.

d. Review how you communicate with students about commuting, attendance, in-class, group and independent learning, support, and the wider student experience to help students to know what is expected of them and to let them know if changes are made to scheduled activities.

e. Review institutional policies to consider how they may disadvantage commuter students and build consideration of commuter students into the development of future key strategic documents.

f. Prioritise reviewing policy and guidance around lecture recording, hybrid lectures and the role of the VLE in enabling students to learn.

g. Initiate timetable reform to reduce the number of days that students are required to be on campus, including providing students with the option to choose modules and courses based on mode or day/time of delivery.

h. Ensure that recruitment, induction and ongoing training for all staff builds in awareness of and capacity to teach and support commuter students.

i. Work with the Students’ Union to provide a more inclusive range of clubs and societies, and to promote online engagement and participation in local areas.

j. Work with local HEIs, transport providers, and administrative authorities to address transportation and safety issues and look for accommodation solutions.

k. Review the financial support for commuter students and any ways that commuter students can be supported, for example via employing commuter students on campus or providing them with loans to purchase travel cards or even bikes.

l. Develop interventions for commuter students, such as carpooling with priority parking, commuter spaces on campus, online support, and personalised learning (i.e. choice of seminars/labs, modules, modes).

10.6 Further research

This is a modest study, that has uncovered some significant issues, and much more research, data and evaluation is required to bring inform the changes required. Some preliminary suggestions are made here.

a. Institutional survey and qualitative research to understand more about commuter students.

b. Piloting of interventions specifically designed to support and improve the engagement of commuter students.

c. Collaborative work to re-imagine the delivery of HE to support the realities of higher education in the twenty-first century.

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