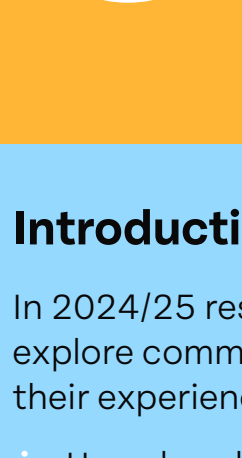


Commuter students in higher education institutions in Ireland. A student-centred, whole provider approach to improve student experiences and outcomes

What Is It Like To Be A Commuter Student In Ireland?



[It] 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)

Introduction

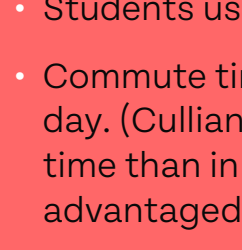
In 2024/25 research was undertaken in higher education institutions in Ireland to explore commuter students' experiences and to consider changes that would improve their experiences and outcomes. It addressed the questions:

- How does being a commuter student impact on student experiences and outcomes in higher education institutions in Ireland?
- How can higher education institutions improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students?

The study combined a semi-structured review and thematic analysis of the websites of the seven higher education institutions (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.


This briefing paper focuses on what it's like to be a commuter student in Ireland, drawing on the findings from the two THFGs.

Commuting



It wastes 2 hours of being on the road every single day (THFG2: 4)

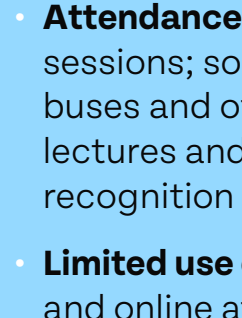
- Students commute between three and five days a week; the majority told us they have to be on campus five days per week.
- Students use a range of transportation methods: particularly bus, train and car.
- Commute times vary, but many of our participants commute for several hours each day. (Cullinan, 2023, found that on average students in Ireland have a longer commute time than in Europe, and the least well-off had longer average commutes that the most advantaged!).
- Overall the students did not identify many advantages of commuting. Saving accommodation costs is mentioned, along with seeing and being supported by family; some students feel commuting creates a useful demarcation between home life and studying and develops time management and organisational skills.
- The challenges and problems associated with commuting were numerous, but not surprising: travel time and tiredness, travel costs, too few buses/trains and poor connections, late and cancelled services, parking facilities, arriving late and missing classes, lack of time for independent study and social engagement, and impact on wellbeing and health. Students also noted that their timetables do not take into account that many students are commuting.



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)

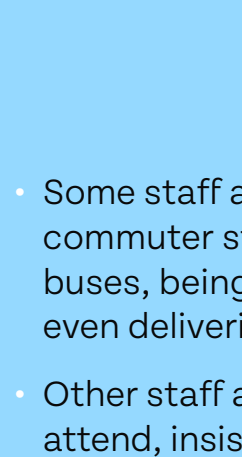
Academic experience

For students living further away in particular, commuting has a negative impact on their academic experience and outcomes. There is a widespread feeling that the academic experience is not organised with commuter students in mind.




Supporting commuter students shouldn't be seen as an add-on or special case. As more students balance study with work, family, or long travel, commuter-friendly design is just good design. Prioritising flexibility, inclusion, and access raises standards for everyone. (THFG2:7)

- Timetable:** This is the most common and biggest issue identified. Students grapple with early starts and late finishes, large gaps between sessions and teaching spread over 4-5 days. This contributes to tiredness.
- Tiredness and reduced study time:** Travelling reduces available study time for independent learning and assignments, and contributes to tiredness and a lack of focus and concentration in classes and in the evening.
- Attendance:** Transportation delays result in late arrival or missing sessions; some students have to miss the end of classes to catch buses and others may opt to save time by skipping in-person lectures and study at home instead. Attendance policies have no recognition or accommodation for commuter students.
- Limited use of online learning and VLE:** Lecture recordings, notes and online attendance are not widely utilised to support and facilitate students learning.
- Attainment:** These factors together impact on commuter students grades and attainment.



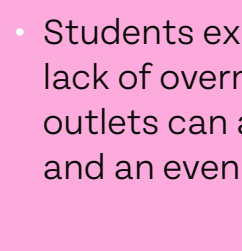
Revamp of the timetable: I already have such issues balancing my academic life with my need to work a job, and a big issue facing this is in the large gaps in the timetable. I have a day where I have a 7-hour gap between classes, and it becomes difficult to fit this into my work schedule. I often end 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)

- Some staff are understanding and make efforts to accommodate the needs of commuter students: not commenting on late arrivals, letting them leave early to catch buses, being lenient with deadlines, allowing them to attend alternative sessions and even delivering classes online.
- Other staff are not accepting, for example asking commuters who arrive late not to attend, insisting they stay and miss buses or deliberately making it difficult for students to catch-up on missed sessions by password protecting notes or only putting half the material online. One student said commuters are seen 'more negatively, seen as an outcast compared to students who live on campus or near campus. (THFG1:2). Staff understanding about the realities of commuter students' lives can result in students missing out on teaching contents, group learning and feedback on their assignments.



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

Wider engagement



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

- Students mostly state that commuting impacts negatively on their wider higher education engagement, both participating in organised activities, which are usually in the evenings, and engaging with peers.
- Students explained that there are fewer transport connections in the evening and a lack of overnight parking. Lack of social spaces and closing times of campus food outlets can also prevent students from hanging around between the end of teaching and an evening event.

Improvements

THFG participants identified a range of changes and improvements that would support their engagement and success.

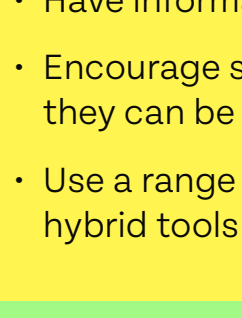
Academic experience

The changes suggested to enhance the academic experience assume empathy towards commuter students, and could be broadly described as a 'compassionate' pedagogy or approach which considers the wider context in which students study and seeks to identify and alleviate aspects of the learning environment that create discomfort or disadvantage, and promote well-being. The key changes suggested are:

- Timetable:** Reduce the number of early starts and late finishes; condensed/blocked timetable; reduce the number of days on campus.
- Attendance:** Remove attendance requirements for commuter students; offer some online attendance options.
- Use the VLE to support learning and engagement:** Post slides and summary notes online; record lectures; use online discussion boards.
- Flipped learning:** support some remote learning and make in-person sessions valuable.
- Independent and group learning:** Encourage groups to use online platforms for study.
- Assessment:** Offer more flexible deadlines; later start times for exams and individual assessments (e.g. midday rather than 9am); alternative options for CA; and online exams.
- Flexible delivery of academic support:** For example, online provision or session outside of normal hours.

Staff development

There was widespread agreement that many staff would benefit from more knowledge, awareness and understanding about commuter students. More appreciation of the realities of commuter students' lives to enable them to make compassionate adjustments.

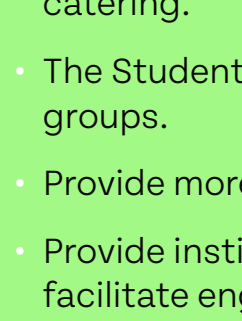


Identifying to staff the challenges of commuting such as the typical day doesn't start at 9am, arriving early for parking, public transport doesn't align with uni start times, facilities aren't available to those who arrive early on campus, etc. (THFG2:4)

Specific suggestions made:

- Learn about the experiences of commuter students for example, a day-in-the-life of a commuting student.
- Have information about how many commuter students are in their classes.
- Encourage staff to find out about the commuter students in their classes, and how they can be supported to succeed.
- Use a range of learning methods including posting material on the VLE and online and hybrid tools for class discussion and group working

Wider engagement



Promoting events during lunch hours or short gaps between lectures to help commuters participate in campus life without needing to stay late. (THFG2:4)

A range of suggestions were made to facilitate commuter student engagement in the wider higher education experience:

- Day time activities or start earlier in the evening; make use of gaps in the timetable.
- Alternative activities, such as opportunities for online engagement, information to support local engagement, or the organisation of activities in local areas where lots of commuters live.
- Provision of breakfast and lunch for commuters, and longer opening hours for on site catering.
- The Student Union could have a commuter student officer and could set up commuter groups.
- Provide more information about, and flexible delivery of, student support services.
- Provide institutional buses, e.g. to popular locations or to bus/train stations to facilitate engagement in activities in the evenings.
- Financial support or provision of accommodation for commuters to enable them to stay overnight.

1 Cullinan, J. (2023) 'A profile of college student commuters in Ireland', Centre for Economic Research on Inclusivity and Sustainability (CERIS) Working Paper Series, 2023/03.