



Transforming Learning

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

Quick Wins For The New Academic Year



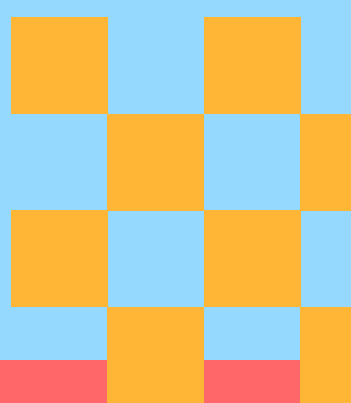
There's really been not a single adjustment in my college during my course of study so I would say it's affected me a lot but I just have to deal with it. (THFG2: 4)

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.



Headline findings

The review of institutional websites found that overall there is weak acknowledgement and representation of commuter students on the websites, and there are gaps in relation to some or all of these topics in each institution's site: explicit recognition of and commitment to commuter students on the website and in institutional policy documents; very little genuinely flexible, blended and inclusive learning that is designed and suitable to meet the needs of full-time undergraduate commuter students; and a wider student experience that is usually oriented towards residential students and ignores commuter students.

Those who commute generally perceive relatively few advantages. The THFGs found that students experience commuting quite negatively: it takes a lot of time, it is expensive, and they have to be on campus the majority of days each week. Once on campus the academic experience is not designed to facilitate their engagement, and the wider student experience is non-existent for the majority of commuter students. The most significant barrier to academic engagement is the timetable which contributes to missing sessions, tiredness and wellbeing issues and reduced time for independent study.

Quick wins

It is acknowledged that some fundamental changes are required within institutions to engage and support commuter students effectively. All institutions however are encouraged to implement the quick wins suggested below before the start of the new academic year 2025/26.

1. 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 for commuter students.
2. Explicitly welcome commuter students to the institution during induction and celebrate what they contribute to the institution (e.g. knowledge of the area; links to the community and region; time management and organisational skills).
3. Create a point of contact for commuter students and encourage commuter students to identify themselves to the institution. They can be given information and support about travelling, studying and wider engagement, and be alerted directly about class cancellations etc.
4. 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.
5. Promote a lounge or space for commuter students to spend time, store belongings, charge electronic devices etc, and consider providing a breakfast or lunch for commuters.
6. Identify programmes with particularly high numbers of commuter students and develop a 'compassionate' timetable for commuters.
7. Organise staff training to raise awareness of commuters' experiences, and encourage and facilitate staff to find out about their commuter students.
8. Teaching staff should acknowledge the existence of commuters in their classes, discuss their experience and make some adjustments, e.g. anticipating some late arrivals; providing recordings or summaries online; using the VLE tools to facilitate engagement before, during and after teaching.
9. Develop guidance for group working using online platforms to encourage inclusion of commuter students.
10. Work with the Students' Union to organise a day-time activity in your academic or professional service area, or to set up a commuter-led group, or to deliver society talks and meetings online.
11. Offer one-to-one student support via online platforms and at flexible times.
12. Develop a hybrid commuter student forum to meet others and raise issues of concern, to provide representation, hear commuter student voices and to generate an action plan.



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July 2025

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Please get in touch for further information, briefings and the final research report, or to tell me what changes you have made, either individually or institutionally.

This research was supported by the University of York's Economic and Social Research Council's Impact Acceleration Account; the National Technological University TransfOrmation for Recovery and Resilience (N-TUTORR) project and the Technological Universities Association (formerly the Technological Higher Education Association). This research received ethical approval from the University of York and from participating Irish THEPs.



PARTNER INSTITUTIONS



The Commuter Project study was led by Prof. Liz Thomas (University of York) under the N-TUTORR Student Empowerment program (2022-2025) co-led by Dr Carina Ginty (ATU) and Dr Moira Maguire (DKIT), supported by TUA and the HEA.