

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

What Changes Do Commuter Students Want To Improve Their Experience?



[Higher] 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)

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.

Commuter students generally found the experience of commuting to be quite negative, with few advantages. Furthermore, they felt their on-campus experience is not designed to facilitate their engagement. Students find that the organisation and delivery of the academic experience does not accommodate their needs, and they have few opportunities to engage with the wider student experience.

Drawing on the THFGs, this briefing paper focuses on the changes commuter students would like to improve their experience.

Travel interventions

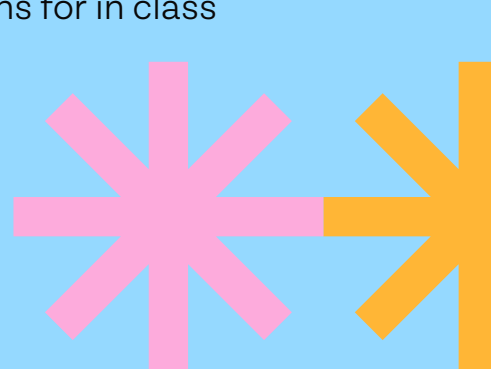
- Align teaching timetables with bus timetables
- Provide financial support for commuter students
- Negotiate travel discounts for students using public transport
- Develop, promote and incentivise car sharing schemes
- Lay on institutional buses from the station
- Arrange institutional buses from popular commuter destinations
- Set-up a breakfast scheme for commuters
- Provide lunch vouchers to encourage eating on campus
- Provide more student accommodation near to the institution's campus



Academic experience

Students identified many changes that would enhance their academic engagement and success. The changes suggested 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 (Killingback et al 2024¹). The key changes suggested are 'commuter compassionate':

- 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.
- Mode of delivery:** Make use of hybrid and online delivery for some parts of the teaching allowing students more choice.
- Classroom learning:** Ensure that in-person sessions are valuable and worth attending, for example, using flipped learning, which combines remote learning with active in-person learning sessions.
- Use of the VLE to support learning and engagement:** Post slides and summary notes online; record lectures; include online discussion boards to encourage interaction.
- Independent and group learning:** Encourage groups to use online platforms for study and messaging apps to keep everyone informed and up to date.
- Assessment:** Offer more flexible deadlines; later start times for exams and individual assessments (e.g. midday rather than 9am); alternative options for in class assessment; online exams and remote rather than in-person submission.
- Delivery of academic support:** Be flexible to meet different needs of students, for example, online provision or sessions outside of normal hours.



Staff development

There was widespread agreement that many staff would benefit from more knowledge, awareness and understanding about commuter students, to enable them to make compassionate adjustments.



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)

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.

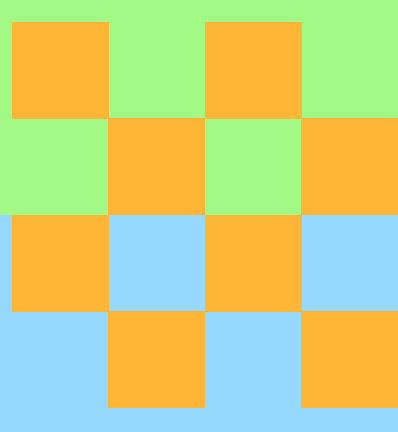
Wider engagement



Providing financial funding for commuter students to help with transport; Having virtual support student services in place targeted toward commuter students; Carpooling; Having events spread out at different times to allow for students to attend them; Having a representative within the students' union in order to have more outlets; Private bus services to help making commuting cheaper. (THFG1: 14)

A range of suggestions were made to facilitate 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 Killingback, C., Tomlinson, A., & Stern, J. (2024). Compassionate pedagogy in higher education: A scoping review. Journal of University Teaching and Learning Practice, 21(10). <https://10.53761/tyvrw787>

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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.

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