

How Being a Commuter Student Potentially Affects Social and Academic Engagement

Introduction

This article will look to extend understanding of engagement amongst commuter students, both academically and socially, and my personal experiences of being a commuter student at Brunel University London. I will highlight the areas in my studies that were engaging and the challenges I have faced.

Who are Commuter Students?

The definition of commuter students varies from institution to institution, Jacoby (2000) defines it as individuals whose term time postcode is different to the university, and who tend to travel to and from their place of study. Research suggests that commuter students appear to be predominantly from lower socio-economic backgrounds, of BAME origin and are older than 'traditional' students (Thomas & Jones, 2017). This combination of characteristics makes it difficult to determine the key factors influencing outcomes for commuter students. According to data analysed by The Student Engagement Partnership (TSEP), university students in the UK are increasingly opting to commute to their place of study whilst living at home, moving away from the traditional relocation, in the form of student accommodation (Thomas & Jones, 2017). This increase in numbers makes it an increasing priority for Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and student engagement professionals.

Background of Brunel University London

Brunel University London is a higher education institution based in Uxbridge, London that provides degree programmes across a wide range of disciplines from undergraduate to postgraduate both in the UK and overseas. The special approach of combining academia with practical, entrepreneurial and imaginative ability strengthens its position as a leading multidisciplinary research-intensive university that delivers economic and social benefit to over 13,000 students of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Brunel University London, 2018).

What is Student Engagement?

Across the higher education sector and amongst institutions, there is a lack of consistency and clarity of an explicit shared definition of student engagement, and what it entails. The Higher Education Funding Council England defines engagement as "*The process whereby institutions and sector bodies make deliberate attempts to involve and empower students in the process of shaping the learning experience*" (Little, Locke, Scesa & Williams, 2009). Therefore, engagement can be characterised in various ways with a focus on academic activities such as preparing for lectures and demonstrating interest and passion in a learning environment (Kuh, 2001). Research also indicates that the level of academic challenge students experience during their studies and participating in other purposeful activities, including social activities, directly influences the quality of students' learning and their overall educational experience (Pascarella, 2001). The definition of engagement within this

article will look into how the traditional views suggested by Kuh (2001) have most likely changed to include broader social activities, which Pascarella (2001) considers essential. It involves an actively aware student who partakes in university life beyond the academic sphere involving themselves in extra-curricular activities such as sports and societies, widening their experience and exposure to social engagement. This type of engagement may traditionally be easier for on campus students, but commuter students face challenges. Commuter students may experience a range of commitments which campus based students may not face; this could include part-time work and caring responsibilities. The need to balance multiple schedules and responsibilities may lead to commuter students feeling disconnected and unable to engage with the social activities suggested by Pascarella (2001).

Nevertheless, despite the lack of involvement in enriching experiences it is probable to suggest that commuter students are more academically engaged when it comes to their studies rather than socially. Commuter students were more likely to read for pleasure, write papers, participate in discussions, and collaborate with peers (Kuh, 2001). Work by Kuh (2001) has shown that academic engagement is positive in unlocking student potential and retention, commuter students therefore can be identified as a cohort at risk from social disengagement. This is problematic because what students gain from their university experience is dependent on how much time and effort they put into their studies and other purposeful activities (Pascarella, 2001).

Academic Engagement

A commuter student's journey to the institution may not be seen as worthwhile if their lectures are not engaging, when considering that commuter student's travel on average 22 miles or more to get to university (Grove, 2013) it is plausible to suggest they will have higher expectations than their campus based peers. Students are likely to make their own value judgments about the quality and usefulness of attending taught classes. Brunel University has made progress to improve student interaction and engagement. Through the freedom of being able to learn from home, via the learning platform: 'Blackboard Learn – Panopto Lecture Capture'. Students are now able to hear the recording of the lecture in their own time and pace as well as being able to access online teaching materials with ease.

From my experience, there were instances where I did feel disengaged from studies influencing my decision to travel to university. The biggest influence was the lack of interaction from lecturers to create an enjoyable and engaging environment.

There are also further structural barriers for commuter students such as the timetable, which may not be very commuter student friendly due to the early starts and late finishes coupled with large gaps in-between. This is further emphasised if it is the only lecture for the day, with some students feeling angry and disappointed in regards to value for money.

The time pressures of travelling to and from university can potentially affect commuter student's ability to complete exams and coursework to a high standard, due to time spent commuting rather than studying. Therefore, commuter students will

have to decide if they will forego coming into university, where they will have access to resources, to focus time on completing assignments at home.

Commuter students may also be more keen to secure a good degree and graduate employment by prioritising their academic engagement as they perceive student loans as 'debts' compared to their campus students (Thomas & Jones, 2017). This is relatable to my own experiences as I prioritise academic engagement and working part time over social activities to get through the challenges and costs of university.

Personal Reflection as a Commuter Student

As a commuter student myself, I have experienced the positives and negatives of commuting to university during my undergraduate degree. The following is my personal reflection of being a commuter student.

Waking up early in the morning for a 9am lecture is always a struggle. I set twelve alarms one after the other to ensure I am awake at 6am to leave home by 7am to endure an hour and a half tube journey to university, which not only takes willpower but also a great deal of motivation. Therefore, starting my day requires a large amount of planning and time management.

My decision to commute was not taken lightly but with a great deal of thought, taking into account:

- Increased living expenses (rent, utility bills and food cost)
- Access to resources living on campus (closer to academic resources and support)
- Possibility of being distracted by my peers and social events.
- The possibility of feeling homesick affecting my studies.

After considering all these factors, I took the decision to commute. Reflecting upon this, it is probable to suggest some students may be positive about their choice in commuting as it provides the best possible option in their personal circumstances, allowing them to focus on their studies without distraction from peers. Conversely, some students may express they are less likely to be engaged if they are commuting, which may not have been fully appreciated before becoming a commuter student. This could be due to a range of contributing factors some of which I have personally experienced; this includes travel expenses, poor sense of belonging, exhaustion and stress.

The decision I took nevertheless has not in my opinion, affected the way I engage in university life. I still enjoy the nightlife and ambiance that any other campus student will experience, but just have the added hassle in getting back home before the last tube. In addition, I also participate in a wide range of volunteering and enhancement activities such as 'Brunel Buddies' which is a mentoring scheme to help first year students during the first few weeks of university; and being elected to the Raise and Give society who overlook all fundraising activity and events in Brunel.

As suggested by Thomas and Jones (2017), commuter students demonstrate less engagement in enhancement activities organised through their academic

departments, such as being student ambassadors or mentors than centrally organised activities such as career events and volunteering. They tend to give low priority to social engagement, with both friends and structured activities, lacking the ability to improve social skills through interactions with peers and the wider public.

However, my experience at Brunel University does not match what the literature suggests. I am very engaged in university life, not being afraid of meeting new people, volunteering on campus and participating in various society activities, this has allowed me to build up a great rapport amongst my peers whilst also making new friends and feeling part of the university community. It is likely most commuter students will not fulfil living the campus life and, because of travel, they will not have the time to make a larger friendship group compared to campus students. The biggest influence of feeling engaged with university activities that occur during the night, for me, was in making the right friends who will appreciate your company and will not mind if you stay over a night. If I was unable to make the right friends, I highly doubt I would have been able to enjoy the nightlife of Brunel. Thus, from my experience it is important for universities to facilitate commuter students in finding likeminded people and friends at the beginning of the student lifecycle (settling in stage). This can be done through targeted mentoring/buddy schemes, dedicated off-campus society events and course related initiatives aimed at integration and cohesion, such as 'Business Life' which is an innovative programme designed to offer Brunel students professional qualifications and essential employability skills whilst studying at university. Nevertheless, there are other possible reasons why students may not be able to attend evening events, such as caring responsibilities making it very difficult for them to stayover or time constraints from public transport. A suggestion would be to increase the number of daytime events which all students can be actively involved in, including commuter students. In my opinion, being engaged both socially and academically is critical to being a successful well-rounded student.

Reflecting upon this, a possible explanation of disengagement could be derived from external influences, including continued travel disruptions and the increased cost of travel, resulting in missed lectures beyond the commuter student's control. This may be perceived as a lack of engagement by staff, who have 'traditional' expectations about students moving away from home and engaging in higher education (Thomas & Jones, 2017). Institutions may not factor in students making tiring journeys to study, with little time for wider engagement. However, there are also internal influences that can possibly restrict engagement amongst commuter students like myself; this includes the lack of social places and areas to spend time. Correlated with the lack of a wider social network, this could inhibit participation in social and enhancement activities. The storage of bags and the lack of food options on campus, especially halal, kosher and vegan offerings can also influence engagement.

My suggestions and solutions to these engagement problems for commuter students include:

- Blocked timetable over two or three days, which includes social activities.
- Dedicated spaces to store bags, books, sports kit etc.

- Improved access to travel information in university (digital notice boards).
- Develop a community environment which provides support and 'normalises' being a commuter student in higher education through induction events, social media forums and regular meet ups.
- Increased day-time activities such as sports and society events
- Increased security around campus after dusk (to reassure any concerns about safety)
- Greater awareness and acknowledgment of commuter student issues by staff and academics.
- Facilitating short term stays/accommodation

Conclusion

The growing number of commuter students in the UK higher education landscape has meant engagement amongst this cohort to become very important. The literature into student engagement suggests students who live on campus are more engaged overall compared to students who commute, as learning facilities and support services are within close proximity (Matson & Chickering, 1975; Lange, 2014). In addition, it appears that the further away from campus a student is the less likely they are to take advantage of the educational resources and wider academic experiences the institution provides. Thus, proximity to the campus can potentially make a difference in commuter students' level of engagement. As the research suggest commuter students are less likely to engage, but this is not true for all commuter students to be treated as a homogenous group. My experiences at Brunel University refutes this hypothesis, as I have engaged highly both academically and socially I was still able to take advantage of educational resources and enjoy wider academic & social involvements, mainly because of the friendship group I had, creating that sense of belonging. However, I recognise that more can be done to create greater engagement amongst commuter students.

There are also practical issues to consider in understanding why commuter students are disengaged; this could be through caring and employment responsibilities or perhaps a lack of awareness of the benefits to learning outcomes and satisfaction of active engagement. But then again, this may differ across institutions and for the individual students, as I am still young with no caring responsibilities and have a supportive family. Traditional definitions of engagement may need to be reconsidered in light of the new student behaviours.

My number one recommendation for any university is to look into designating or creating spaces specifically for commuter students to relax during gaps in their timetable, study, or a place to socialise. This will create a true sense of belonging and increase student engagement amongst a cohort of learners with very specific experiences and needs, and which is ever growing.

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