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Educational Journeys: Understanding How Women Commuter Students' Daily Mobilities Can Shape Their Higher Education Experience

Abstract

Higher education in the UK has traditionally centred on students who relocate. However, an increasing number of students now remain at home and commute to campus instead. This shift might limit academic and social integration, which could hinder student retention and success. While extant research notes the difficulties associated with commuting, little is known about the texture of these everyday mobilities. Given the gendered ways in which urban space is experienced, understanding how mobilities influence the educational journey is critical. Our article addresses this gap by drawing on a mixed methods research project conducted between March and April 2024, involving 19 women commuter students. We explore three research questions. First, how do women commuter students attending a city-based university commute to campus and how are these mobilities experienced? Second, how do students negotiate the varied spaces that comprise their everyday mobilities. Third, in what ways might these mobilities shape academic and social integration. Importantly, this study highlights that while the everyday mobilities of women commuter students should not be used to inadvertently reinforce outdated narratives, their experiences nonetheless reveal meaningful tensions between their lifeworlds and education. Universities should draw on these experiences to develop support tailored to this growing population.

Keywords

Commuter students, higher education, educational mobilities, city-based university, urban space, women students, everyday mobilities

Introduction

In the UK, going to university has traditionally involved relocating to campus-based accommodation (Finn and Holton, 2019; Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022). Nonetheless, “attending a distant university is too often the preserve of white, middle class, privately educated young people” (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018: 4). This distinction is mirrored in the kind of institutions that predominantly comprise residential students. Students are more likely to move a significant distance from home to **join** research-intensive universities than post-92 institutions (ibid). **In 2014-2015, for example,** the majority of students enrolled at the University of Oxford and the University of Cambridge had relocated. In contrast, more than one in four students at the University of the West of Scotland (77.5%), and Newman University (76.2%) in Birmingham lived in their parents' home, less than 91km away from their chosen institution (ibid, p. 16).

Consequently, “commuter students”, as they are termed (Maslin, 2025), are routinely viewed through the lens of their residential counterparts, and the perceived educational “lack” this implies (Kenyon, 2024). Maslin (2025) describes this persistent framing as a “deficit narrative”. In

turn, the positive aspects of associated mobilities are rarely considered (Wilkinson and Badwan, 2021). These students have also been widely overlooked precisely “because they are misrecognised as immobile and rooted in place” (Holton and Finn, 2018: 428). While the institutional focus on residential mobility endures (Holton and Finn, 2018), commuter students are gaining scholarly attention (Finn, 2017; Maslin, 2025). The number of students who choose to commute is also rising (Thomas, 2020). As Kenyon (2024) notes, “40% of full-time HE students, studying at UK higher education institutions (HEIs), are commuter students” (p. 116). This trend is being replicated globally (Pokorny et al., 2017).

In the UK, the antecedents of this shift can be traced back to the late 1990s and the policy initiatives that sought to make the student body more representative of the general population (Thomas, 2020). This was later followed by the “removal of student-linked state funding and an incremental removal of caps on student numbers” (Austin and Sharr, 2021: 79-80) in 2010 and the Higher Education and Research Act of 2017, which established a market among Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). As a corollary, more young adults now attend university than ever before, and an increasing proportion are from under-represented groups (Kenyon, 2024). Significantly, this trend accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic (Maslin, 2025). For institutions lacking adequate real estate, this growth meant students either had to relocate to town or city-based student accommodation or live at home while commuting (see Fazackerley and Livingston, 2022). A confluence of rising tuition fees and the cost of living (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018) meant many students chose the latter (Jack, 2023). The unwillingness or inability to relocate is also associated with features that commonly define non-traditional students (Kenyon, 2024; Newbold, 2015).

National data on the young adults who attend UK universities on a full-time basis demonstrates that during 2009-2010 and 2014-15, students from the lower social classes, state school, and ethnic minorities were more likely to travel to their place of education (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). These students were also more likely to be “of a nontraditional age, first generation, students of colour, and caring for dependents” (Bauer, 2020: 146). Though similarities with non-traditional students provide some insights into this population, difficulties remain about how this group should be defined (Thomas, 2020). This is particularly the case in the UK, where commuter students are not the educational norm (Holton and Finn, 2018). “Live at home”, “day”, and “local” students have subsequently emerged as outwardly suitable terms (Maslin, 2025). However, not all commuter students necessarily live **in their family** home, nor are they always “local” (Maslin, 2025). A more accurate description of commuter students is “students who do not live in traditional university-owned or privately rented student accommodation”. (Maslin, 2025: 32). **While** this is the definition we adopt throughout the article, **it is not the location of student homes *per se* that** piques our interest.

Importantly, this choice *can* influence *how* and *when* students are on-campus, which could be “daily or just once a week” (Hallam, 2023: 374). **In other words, this choice can frame student mobilities in educational spaces.** Commuter students are also associated with a suite of challenges that are theorised as separating them from their residential counterparts (Hollway-Frieson, 2018; Jacoby and Garland, 2004). For Simpson and Burnett (2019) these challenges can be distilled as “transportation issues, multiple life roles, integrating support systems, and developing a sense of belonging” (p. 288). Surrounding studies (Bauer, 2020; Kirk and Lewis, 2015; Smith et al., 2023; Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022) highlight that these students are more likely to withdraw from university (Baker et al., 2020), less likely to succeed (Dante, Fabris, and Palese, 2013) and that these issues are directly related to the time spent commuting (Hallam, 2023). **Though this might be the**

case, extant literature on commuter students fails to appreciate that these students might have *chosen* this educational path for a variety of reasons (Maslin, 2025). Put differently, being a commuter student is not always borne out of necessity (Finn, 2017), just as concomitant mobilities can be positively experienced as part of one's educational life (Holton and Finn, 2020; Gravett and Ajjawi, 2019; Maslin, 2025).

Yet, a scholarly gap remains in research that seeks to surface the lived mobilities that underpin commuter students as they travel to and from campus (Holton and Finn, 2018). Little is known about “the everyday ‘lifeworlds’ of students, and in particular into their non-institutional spaces ... which make up a significant part of their student experience” (Wilkinson and Badwan, 2021: 374), or how “embodied dispositions” (Jensen, Sheller and Wind, 2015: 375) are framed by gender identity. Given that related research demonstrates women routinely experience concerns about their personal safety as they ambulate urban space (Cumiskey and Brewster, 2012; Topping, 2022), and that gender can inform campus mobilities (withheld for review), this fissure is significant. The scale of this importance is distressingly underlined by the growing number of women who have either been attacked or murdered while commuting home (Hardley and Richardson, 2021; Lothain-McLean, 2021). In response, this article addresses the exigency “to take seriously the mobility practices of apparently immobile students, given that the numbers of students choosing not to move away from home to attend university in the UK are growing” (Holton and Finn, 2018: 426).

Reporting on an original research project conducted in 2024, our study addresses the scholarly gap identified above through the following research questions. First, how do women commuter students attending a city-based university routinely commute to campus and how are these mobilities experienced? Second, how do students negotiate the varied spaces that comprise their everyday mobilities. Third, in what ways might these mobilities shape academic and social integration. To address these questions, between March and April 2024, 19 participants used a chatbot developed by the research team that was accessible through the instant messaging (IM) service Telegram to record their everyday mobilities. Our interest was in leveraging the chatbot to understand the different modes of transportation that participants would use while commuting to and from campus. The chatbot also provided the space for participants to make comments about these mobilities should they so choose. Finally, participants took part in a series of semi-structured interviews to provide qualitative information about the lived experience of these mobilities.

In the following section, we outline the challenges that commuter students are theorised as facing. Drawing on extant theoretical frameworks, we explore how these challenges are framed as negatively affecting their sense of belonging, which is critical to progression and success within HE (Tinto, 1975, 1993, 1997). In doing so, we establish how everyday mobilities might influence how commuter students socially integrate with on-campus communities. At the same time, we temper this “deficit narrative” (Maslin, 2025), by critically reflecting on changing comprehension of university campuses under neoliberalism (Austin and Sharr, 2021), alongside more relational and situated understandings of belonging (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2020). Finally, we demonstrate how existing studies on this population have often overlooked the lived realities of associated mobilities—realities that could add meaningful contours to how the lifeworlds of women commuter students are understood and, in turn, institutionally supported.

Commuter Students, Everyday Mobilities and Educational Challenges

An inescapable aspect of being a commuter student is traveling in and out of the university (Bauer, 2020). The way in which students get to campus, as well as the experience, however, can greatly vary (Maslin, 2025). Transportation decisions are influenced by a range of factors key among which is public transport availability (Newbold, 2015). As Jensen, Sheller and Wind (2015) observe, different from of transport (e.g., walking, bus riding, train travel) and the route taken, carry their own “embodied disposition” (p. 375). The time and season students travel can also influence how safe or unsafe related environments appear (withheld for review). Importantly, this situation can be rendered worse for women who might feel more at risk than other commuters within urban settings (Cumiskey and Brewster, 2012).

Existing research demonstrates that related mobilities can intensify psychological distress (Parker et al., 2021), just as these concerns can be exacerbated by external commitments (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). Much like non-traditional students, “commuter students have additional responsibilities within their jobs and personal lives that can lead to demand overload and inter role conflict when combined with school” (Newbold, 2015: 81). It would be erroneous to suggest, of course, that such responsibilities are only associated with commuter students. As Maslin (2025) rightly points out, having a part-time job is a common feature across all students, whether they commute or not. Nonetheless, it should be noted that women are more likely to work while they study than men (Zhong, et al., 2025). In either case, our interest remains the impact living beyond campus might have on when and how commuter students engage in campus activities (Simpson and Burnett, 2019).

In his seminal work, Tinto (1975) proposes that HE is predicated on two systems: (1) social and (2) academic. Social integration indicates the sense of belonging that emerges through informal associations with one’s peer groups, alongside engaging in extracurricular activities (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022). Academic integration refers to scholastic performance and the degree to which students have intellectually advanced throughout their time at university (ibid). Participation across both systems is apparently key to students continuing their education (Tinto, 1993). Tinto (1997), identifies “integration” and “patterns of interaction” as effectively distinguishing between students who persist with their studies and those who do not. On-campus “integration” and “patterns of interaction” are associated with a higher likelihood that students will report being satisfied with their institution (Thomas and Galambos, 2004). Accordingly, being on-campus is deemed important, as it outwardly facilitates participation in on-campus communities (Tinto, 1993; Simpson and Burnett, 2019). While Tinto’s (1975, 1993, 1997) views remain influential they do not critically engage with how the university campus has changed under neoliberalism (Austin and Sharr, 2021) and since the COVID-19 pandemic (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2020).

For Austin and Sharr (2021), ongoing adjustments to Higher Education since the 1990s have not only repositioned “students” as “consumers” but have reformulated the aesthetics of the university campus. Today, universities are increasingly imbued with what the authors refer to as “lounge space”. This comprises a relaxed landscape of varied and sprawling seating areas. Within this environment, students become “exemplary consumers”, co-located in a space both physical and virtual, which interminably invites them to engage in low-level work (Austin and Sharr, 2021: 90). The importance of ubiquitous technologies and networks should not be underestimated, as they render the “boundaries of campus space permeable” (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2020: 1392). This point is

underlined by Maslin's (2025) **pertinent** discussion of a particular commuter student who attends and enjoys online seminars while in transit (Maslin, 2025).

Though campus has evidently changed (Austin and Sharr, 2021), surrounding studies still cast a light on the kind of spaces commuter students seem to gravitate towards (Kuh et al., 2007), as well as their prioritisation of academic work and academic achievement (Thomas, 2020). Research suggests these students pick quiet environments, such as libraries (Regalado and Smale, 2015), which allow them to focus on coursework (Couture, 2018) in-between classes (Bauer, 2020; withheld for review). On the one hand, this predilection permits commuter students to commit to their studies in a manner commensurate with their residential counterparts (Jacoby, 2000), culminating in comparable academic outcomes (Simpson and Burnett, 2019). On the other, this emphasis on progression does not necessarily come without compromises. Since commuter students regularly utilise their campus-based time to complete university work, there might be fewer opportunities for social interactions and extracurricular activities (Thomas, 2019)—albeit within a transforming space (Austin and Sharr, 2021). Equally, for the purposes of this article, additional factors can influence how willing women students are to socially engage in such events.

For the most part, extracurricular activities are typically scheduled in the evening after teaching has concluded (Maslin, 2025). For commuter students, going along to these activities can mean waiting around on-campus before eventually traveling home—possibly—alone and after dark, which can qualitatively transform how safe an environment feels (withheld for review). Such a prospect can be particularly stressful for women students (Kaminski et al., 2010), who might decide to decline these events for this very reason (Currie, 1994). Related studies also highlight commuter students are less socially engaged than their residential counterparts (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022), and that this situation can become a vicious cycle. As Thomas (2020) explains, not having an active social network can mean not hearing about events, as well as not having someone to go with in the first place. Either way, challenges surrounding social integration could potentially shape the degree to which commuter students feel they belong (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2020). In this context, “belonging” refers to whether students feel personally involved in an institution, as well as accepted, included and connected (Ahn and Davis, 2020).

As a population, commuter students are commonly conceptualised as struggling in this area precisely because of their limited involvement in campus-based activities (Pokorny et al., 2017; Simpson and Burnett, 2019). Though this might be the case, the traditional idea of belonging in higher education should be interrogated. For Gravett and Ajjawi (2020), the diversity of students means “belonging” will likely differ across this population, just as some commuter students will not want to identify themselves with university communities (ibid). Perhaps more importantly, “belonging” should not be interpreted as a fixed state—something to be achieved—but something that is socio-materially constituted (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2020). This point is further underlined by Finn's (2017) example of a residential student who did not want to come out of her room because she found the accelerated sociality of campus life overwhelming (ibid). Conversely, Holton and Finn (2020) describe how a particular student purposely extended his commute “[as] a means through which to feel a sense of belonging at a time of personal crisis (p. 16).

To be clear, these examples do not mean that we shouldn't seek to surface the surrounding mobilities of commuter students, or that these students now belong, but rather that we should remain critical. As Hallam (2023) observes, “[research] indicates that time spent commuting between home and campus significantly affects continuation, the organisational metric collating students' persistence with their studies” (p. 374). Case in point, “[one] London higher education

provider illustrated that for every additional ten minutes commute, the likelihood of students' continuation dropped by 0.63%" (London Higher 2019 cited in Hallam, 2023: 374). Related concerns also extend beyond persistence (Baker et al., 2020). Dante, Fabris, and Palese (2013) found that nursing students only had to live more than 30 minutes from their institution to be associated with a higher chance of academic failure. What these studies highlight is the extent to which ordinary movements can affect the educational experience (Kenyon, 2010, 2011; OfS, 2020). Yet, there is a distinct lack of research that qualitatively explores the texture of these mobilities, and how mobilities might encode certain gendered ways of being that could inform how educational spaces are inhabited (withheld for review). Given the onus on commuting associated with commuter students, and the fact this population is growing, such a gap is striking.

Mobilities literature helpfully establishes that routine journeys do more than simply move people from one location to another (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Embodied movements are predicated on certain "behaviours, practices and performances" (Holton and Finn, 2018: 428) that solidify identities and co-constitute associated experiences of space and place (de Certeau 1984). The mobilities of commuter students, for instance, can be used to maintain extant friendships in new environments (Finn, 2017), as well as establish a sense of belonging to the city-space surrounding campus (Holton and Finn, 2020). And gender can influence these experiences (Topping, 2022). For some women, modes of transport such as buses, trains, and tubes, (Holton and Finn, 2018) can be transformed into "sites of subjugation, contestation, politics, and identity making" (Wilson 2011: 635 cited in Holton and Finn, 2018). Surrounding studies also demonstrate the gendered way in which institutions are inhabited (withheld for review). Though this body of work is important, it does not explicitly explore how related textures of travel might fleetingly configure certain ways of being that could influence academic and social integration. This gap is particularly problematic, given the influence positive emotions can have on deep learning (Quinlan, 2016).

In sum, the rising number of students who commute (Maslin, 2025), as well as the gendered way in which urban environments are traversed, means it is increasingly important to recognise the lifeworlds of commuter students and how they experience the varied spaces that connect to and surround their educational lives (Holton and Finn, 2020; Finn, 2017). At the same time, these experiences should be grounded in a more critical understanding of commuter students (Maslin, 2025), the university campus under neoliberalism (Austin and Sharr, 2021), and a socio-material comprehension of belonging (Gravett and Ajjawi, 2020). In doing so, this understanding can be used to better support commuter students, rather than bolster a dated deficit narrative (Maslin, 2025). Addressing this dearth forms the chief aim of our article. In the following section, we outline the methodology that underpins this research.

Data and methods

The original research for this project was conducted between March and April 2024 and involved the use of a chatbot ($N = 19$) and follow-up semi-structured interviews ($N = 17$). A purposeful sampling strategy was employed to recruit a diverse range of commuter students (Emmel, 2013)—regarding age, programme of study, and whether participants were full-time or part-time—that identify as women enrolled at an urban university. After ethical approval, researchers contacted course offices associated with undergraduate and postgraduate programmes and student societies at our chosen institution to ask if they could distribute information about the project. In either case, messages

encompassed information on our project, what participation would involve, contact details for further information, and explained that each participant would receive a £15 Amazon voucher upon completing the project. The age of participants ranged between 18 and 21 years old (mean = 19.05). 17 participants were full-time students, and 2 participants did not provide this information. All participants were undergraduates. All participants identified as women. Written informed consent was provided by all participants. In the following sections, we outline the methods used, and how data was analysed.

Chatbot data

In total, 19 participants used our chatbot for a period of one-week during the spring term. We were chiefly interested in the different modes of transportation participants utilised to and from campus. The chatbot was accessible through the instant messaging (IM) service Telegram. From Monday to Friday, participants were asked to log how they commuted to and from campus. The chatbot also provided a space for participants to record any additional comments or photographs/videos they might want to share about their everyday mobilities.

Our chatbot was developed using Flow XO: online chatbot software. Flow XO enabled us to control various aspects of the chatbot experience, such as when we asked participants if they were or were not traveling on a given day, as well the time between first and second reminders to complete outstanding tasks. After this period, all participants had moved through the same tasks, with the only variance being whether participants received automatic reminders, or manual reminders if the research team observed a participant had not recorded a response to a task after automated reminders had been sent.

In line with research that utilises experience methods (Shiffman, Stone, and Hufford, 2008) our motive for using the chatbot to gather data about the everyday commuting patterns or participants' in situ hinged around a desire for ecological validity rather than by mitigating the bias related to remembering mobility patterns sometime after they have occurred (Pain, 2000). At the same time and deviating from health science research that characteristically employs experience methods, our chatbot provided a space for qualitative daily notes, such as a comment, photographs and videos. In other words, our use of these methods resonates with how locative media has traditionally been used (withheld for review)

Chatbot data was outputted into individual documents that formed a larger data structure, which was uploaded into the qualitative data analysis software Nvivo. As part of a period of post-research thematic analysis, researchers read through chatbot data for each participant multiple times. Evocative text and images were dialectically coded for visualisation and further analysis. When all data had been analysed, researchers went through this material to further refine our code in line with the direction of this article. Code refinements continued while interviews began.

Semi-structured interviews

In total, 17 participants were interviewed. The age of participants ranged between 18 and 21 years of age (mean = 19.29). All interviews were conducted using the video conferencing software Zoom and lasted for roughly one hour. Interviews were semi-structured and revolved around the experience of commuting to and from campus, how the spaces that comprise these mobilities were negotiated, and finally how these movements shaped the academic and social integration of

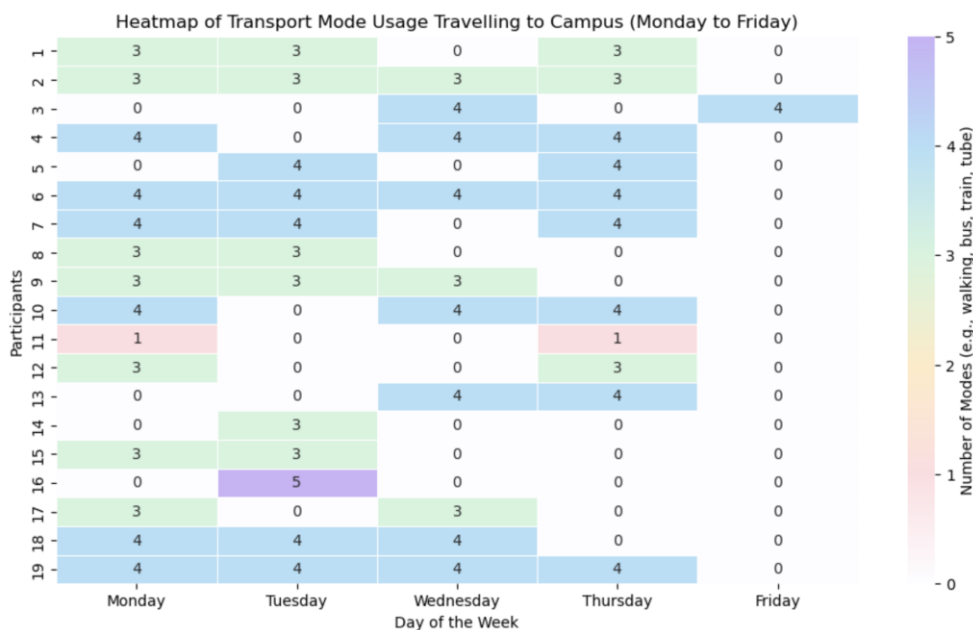
participants. Questions about surrounding mobilities were not framed in terms of the “deficit narrative” outlined above (Maslin, 2025). Instead, we sought to understand how participants experienced and made sense of surrounding mobilities in their own words. In so doing, interviews effectively expounded upon chatbot data.

Following manual transcription, interview data was uploaded into Nvivo for a period of post-research thematic analysis (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Echoing the analysis of chatbot data, interviews were read multiple times, with highlighted text thematically organised into categories relating to the motivation and focus of this project. We continued to refine our coding throughout the interview process, by comparing the code for both interview and chatbot data.

Findings

Commuting Logistics

For participants, the journey in and out of university is not straight forward. Trips to campus rarely comprise one mode of transport (i.e., walking) but frequently entail several. This process is repeated when participants travel home. Rendered using the Python package Seaborn (Waskon, 2021), Figure 1 visualises the complexity of participant journeys ($N = 19$).



The numbers in the heatmap represent the number of modes of transport used on each day. "1" = One mode (e.g., walking), "2" = Two modes (e.g., walking + tube), etc.

Figure 1. Heatmap showing transport mode usage for participants commuting into Campus across a normal week in the Spring Term. Cells with a value of 0 indicate that participants did not travel to university on that day.

Many participants utilise upwards of three or more modes of transport, with one participant using five (i.e., car + bus + train + tube + walking). The convoluted nature of commuting was an aspect of university life that came up during interviews.

“So, my uncle just drops me at the station, which is really near to my house and takes 10 minutes by car. So, from there, I take the London Charing Cross train, which takes like around 1 hour and 15 minutes to reach London Bridge. From there, I take the tube, which is the Northern line ... And then from Angel, it just takes like 5 to 10 minutes to walk to uni. So yeah, the total journey is like around 1 hour 45 or 50 minutes, like almost 2 hours” (Leila, 18, interview)

Lengthy journeys in this context are not unusual (withheld for review). Many participants live upwards of an hour or more away from campus. It should also be noted that participants travel several times a week, with some participants commuting across four days (see Figure 1). Given what we know about commuting and its relationship with academic success, this travel time is significant (Dante, Fabris, and Palese, 2013; Hallam, 2023).

Alongside lengthy journey times, participants noted that planned trips were repeatedly disrupted by transportation issues, such as delays, cancellations and strike action. Related troubles, of course, are commonplace for many commuters across London (Dex, 2024).

“I was on the train, which would usually be like a straightforward [journey], but I was stuck in between London Bridge and London Blackfriars because of signalling errors, so we would like move for like 2 centimetres and then it would stop again and it was just so frustrating ... It is really unpredictable” (Vera, 18, Interview)

For some participants, delays led to them either abandoning their journey altogether or travelling earlier in the day to allow more time to get to university (Newbold, 2015). As Tara (20, Interview) rationalises, “when I do go, I always try and get there early anyways, just because I don't want to deal with, like, train problems or bus problems and stuff like that”. For other participants, the decisions to travel earlier in the day was not so much a choice, but a necessity that revolved around the need to attend a scheduled event, such as an exam, which directly related to their academic progression (Kirk and Lewis, 2015).

Though the decision to travel earlier in the day helped allay concerns about being late, it exacerbated a related challenge that many participants noted: the cost of travel (Thomas, 2020). Commuting in and out of London is notoriously expensive. As Zara (19, Interview) reflects “around £270 per month”. This situation can be made worse depending on the time participants choose to travel (Kenyon, 2024). Such a decision has consequences that extend beyond fiscal concerns (Holton and Finn 2018). Commuting later in the day can mean journeying when it is dark (withheld for review). For many participants, even though it was Spring Term, darkness remained an issue that came up during interviews and was rendered worse because of being a woman.

“it's more unsettling to, like, travel in the dark.... it feels like it's nighttime, even though it could be like 5pm” (Cleo, 19, Interview)

“Travelling at night alone makes me feel unsafe” (Juno, 18, Interview)

Participants also routinely experienced environments that were overcrowded, hot and unventilated, which had a negative psychological effect on many participants (Parker et al., 2021),

making them feel uncomfortable, anxious and in one case worried she might be pushed onto the track.

“I see so many articles of women being pushed onto the track by some random person. I'm just scared in general. If the train has a really big gap between the platform and getting onto the train, I'm so wary of that” (Vera, 18, Interview)

Participants described witnessing antisocial behaviour from other commuters. Though these situations were more likely to occur when participants were travelling home in the late afternoon and early evening, Sage (20), used the chatbot to document a specific incident on the Elizabeth Line train when the train was stopped “due to a passenger having a knife onboard”. Other participants detailed intoxicated commuters acting in a manner that caused them to feel uncomfortable, and within enclosed spaces that were less populated because of the time that were commuting. In these instances, quieter environments became unsettling precisely because there were less passengers to offer the veneer of protection.

“It was kind of empty, and the car that I was in, two guys came inside and then one guy, it was a different guy, stood up and then he was like asking for stuff. Not like robbing us, but like just asking for money and like, do you have this, do you have that, can I use it. He was being quite aggressive” (Mira, 19, Interview)

Importantly, this underlines the embodied experience of student mobilities (Finn, 2027). Though some commuting students might be able to attend online classes while traveling (Maslin, 2025), not all students find themselves in spaces that feel suited to this kind of focus and participation. In either case, nuance is required. Throughgoing this section we have cast a light on the logistics that underpin everyday mobilities for participants during a regular week in a typical term. In the next section, we consider the impact commuting has on participants, by focusing on how related spaces are negotiated.

Negotiating Everyday Mobilities

The everyday mobilities of participants were negotiated in a variety of ways (de Certeau 1984). Strategies were used to allow participants to feel more comfortable while commuting to and from campus. Related behaviours ranged from what might be deemed passive performances, such as signalling to strangers that one is otherwise engaged (Hardley and Richardson, 2021), to more active actions, such as carrying pepper spray should a situation arise that required immediate action (Cumiskey and Brewster, 2012). Regarding the former, participants commonly sought to avoid engaging with unknown others throughout their travels, which manifest in the following way.

“I just honestly try to keep my distance. I try not to look at them much so that they don't look at me and yeah, definitely keep my distance. Just try and avoid them. Pretend they're not there and not engage” (Ivy, 19, Interview)

“...if you're engaging with other people, you are kind of asking to be a target. Like, if you just keep to yourself, don't talk even if they're trying to engage...they usually just get bored and leave you alone” (Kian, 19, Interview)

Within spaces where participants felt less able to keep their distance, such as on a bus or train (Holton and Finn, 2018), headphones were correlatively utilised to communicate to other passengers that they did not want to be disturbed (Hardley and Richardson, 2021).

“I'll wear my headphones so no one will talk to me” (Vera, 18, Interview)

“Sometimes people try to talk to me, but I still have my AirPods in” (Sage, 20, Interview)

While listening to music provided some comfort by disconnecting participants from their immediate setting this disconnection came at a cost. Participants were correspondingly less cognisant of their surroundings (Cumiskey and Brewster, 2012). To address this disconnection, participants would either turn their music down, remove one earbud, or switch it off all together. This response occurred when participants were negotiating unfamiliar or unsettling settings.

“Like when I'm in areas I'm familiar with the areas I think like safe or anything like I'm always like listening to music while walking. So, like, if I'm passing through somewhere where I don't feel that safe, like I want to be more aware of my surroundings” (Elara, 20, Interview)

In these spaces, Nova (20, Interview) would use her headphones to listen to directional information. This served two purposes. First, using headphones continued to convey to unknown others that she was otherwise engaged and did not want to be disturbed (Hardley and Richardson, 2014). Second, the directional information received allowed her to appear familiar while navigating an unfamiliar space, which had the following effect.

“If you walk as if you know what you're doing, people are less likely to approach you” (Nova, 19, Interview)

For the most part, how participants chose to use their headphones was fluidly contingent on their surroundings and how comfortable participants felt within different environments (Jensen, Sheller and Wind, 2015).

The cognisance alluded to above leads us on to another way in which participants negotiate the myriad challenges associated with commuting (Bauer, 2020). For some participants, a recurring feature of their everyday mobilities was the need to remain vigilant, even if this came at the cost of enjoying their music. Indeed, the term “vigilant” came up repeatedly during interviews. For Leila and Omar, this attentiveness also meant keeping their belonging close by.

“I've heard is that robbery is quite common. So yeah, I just have to make sure that my bag is beside me because I have my laptop with money in it and my phone” (Leila, 18, Interview)

“I would keep my valuable items like my phone in my bag and keep my bag with me at all times and sort of not be too into my phone or into my music but looking at what's around

me because it could be like a split second, and like you don't even realise something has happened. So yeah, just being aware of my surroundings” (Omar, 21, Interview)

Evidently, then, remaining vigilant is not so much a behaviour *per se* but more a state of mind that can be particularly tiring when travel times and frequency are considered (see Figure 1).

For other participants, being vigilant would provoke them to make sudden environmental decisions. When commuting by train, for example, this could mean strategically choosing which seat to sit on, moving to a more populated carriage if the one they were in felt too quiet, or getting off the train if other passengers began engaging in antisocial behaviour. Again, this demonstrates how even though the campus can be remotely engaged (Maslin, 2025), this space is contingent on more than just a stable Wi-Fi connection.

“This one time, there was a group of guys who were like, were really, really like, just insistent... I just got off at the station. Then unluckily they got off at the same station. So, then I just pretended to go somewhere else. I like tapped out and then tapped back in” (Elara, 20, Interview)

For other participants, environmental decisions came while they were walking between locations. This could mean choosing a route that circumvented quieter or more secluded areas like parks (Hardley and Richardson, 2021).

“I also avoid going through parks, which [redacted park name] kind of is, because parks are just huge and mostly closed off from the streets like there's not that many entrances and they are not well lit. So, I don't walk near parks if I can. I walk on the other side of the street” (Livia, 21, Interview)

Again, what these extracts reveal is the various ways in which complex journeys can be further complicated by other factors, such as the season, time of day, environmental setting, as well as the people who coinhabit these spaces. Evidently, many participants also felt compelled to remain vigilant throughout their journeys. The culmination of ongoing coping strategies led some participants to feel frustrated this was something they had to do.

I think it's really stupid, because why am I doing all of this just to feel safe? Why am I having to do all of this just to feel safe to come home when that should be a given? (Mira, 19, Interview)

Importantly, participants interpreted the negotiation of space as a gendered issue that women routinely face (Cresswell and Uteng, 2008), but that is not fully appreciated by universities.

In this section, we have explored how participants negotiate their everyday mobilities. In the next section, we develop this understanding further by explicitly considering how the ordinary mobilities of participants might influence academic and social integration.

Academic and Social Integration

For many participants, a recurring outcome of their everyday mobilities was the marked effect this had on their energy levels (Maslin, 2025). Participants routinely suffered from fatigue. This occurred as a byproduct of commuting in and out of campus, which would worsen as the term progressed, and their workload increased. Participants frequently travelled early in the day, either to avoid transportation issues or because of scheduled events, such as lectures or seminars (Thomas, 2020). Understandably, the length and complexity of trips could result in participants feeling tired (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022).

“Honestly, when I'm getting to uni at this hour, I'm just like, "Oh my God, I want to get out of uni as fast as possible" (Kian, 19, Interview)

For participants, travel fatigue did not simply affect their energy levels but also made it more challenging to concentrate and engage in class. As Leila (18, Interview) noted, “I can't concentrate very much”. This highlights how mobilities of commuter students can frame ensuing educational experiences. To be clear, this is not to suggest that all commuter students experience their mobilities in this way (Maslin, 2025), as we know this is not the case (Finn, 2017). Nonetheless, the importance of surfacing the experiences of those that do remains, as it can highlight when mobilities and educational lives collide. For Mira (19, Interview) the issue of engagement was directly related to the travel environments she experienced *en route* to university.

“I would maybe speak up in like seminars or something instead of just being quiet and minding my own business, because that's what we have to do on the train, be quiet and mind my own business.” (Mira, 19, Interview)

As a corollary to the kind of negotiated mobilities detailed above, such as disengaging and avoiding contact with other passengers, this mindset then informed how Mira approached classes that required participants. In turn, we would suggest that much like campus (Austin and Sharr, 2021) sites of mobility do not necessarily end when students step off the train (Shelly and Urry, 2006). Instead, the experience of these spaces can linger as students enter campus. For these students, their everyday mobilities can directly shape how they engage with university-based learning activities.

Moving forward, and in response to the frequent trips in and out of university, many participants felt correlatively compelled to make the most of their time while on campus (Thomas, 2020). For participants, this compulsion was partially because of the cost associated with travel, and the fact they felt obligated to be productive to make these trips more worthwhile (see Bauer, 2020).

“The train costs like 7 pounds per day, so $7 * 4$ is 28. But then, sometimes there are extra charges depending on the times you take the train. So, it can actually be quite expensive to travel, which is why I try to make it more productive when I get into uni. We kind of paid a lot to get here” (Nico, 20, Interview)

Such a mindset also stemmed from the fact that many participants lived at home with several other family members, including younger siblings. In other words, these were not always spaces where

participants could quietly focus on their work without being disturbed (Smith et al., 2023), which casts a critical light on the reality of being at home (Blunt and Dowling, 2006).

“At home it's always busy ... I don't think there's ever like an empty room, which is obviously good, but when it comes to uni, sometimes it gets a little bit difficult” (Tara, 20, Interview)

At the same time, and perhaps because of the physical distance between these environments, many participants liked to keep their home separate from their university work.

“Home is somewhere where I can just go and relax from all of the things that I do in university” (Livia, 21, Interview)

In line with related research, participants often found themselves using the library between classes (Couture, 2018; Regalado and Smale, 2015). This was particularly helpful during days when scheduling involved lengthy breaks in-between timetabled events (Bauer, 2020). Libraries were favoured precisely because they were quiet and allowed participants to get on with their work. Developing this point further, we would argue an implicit appeal of these spaces was the fact participants could disengage from others and focus on the academic side of university life, which they seemingly value.

Though participants like to maximise their time on campus, other factors meant that participants would routinely miss certain classes. For the most part, this was a byproduct of scheduling (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022). The decisions to miss a timetabled event often occurred on those days where participants had few classes timetables and had already travelled in several times that week (Ibid). In these instances, participants would contemplate how worthwhile the trip was, often concluding that it could be missed. This is not to suggest, of course, that residential students do not miss classes or have spotless attendance recorded. However, we would argue the classes that our participants miss are directly rooted in their wider mobilities, which can lead to them routinely missing particularly sessions. The time of scheduled classes was also an issue and particularly on days with fewer events scheduled (Maslin, 2025). Early classes were felt to be particularly burdensome due to the time participants needed to get up to avoid transportation problems (Drex, 2022). Allied to this point, the cost of commuting was a significant issue that could lead to participants staying at home (Maguire and Morris, 2018; Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022).

“Fridays, I used to miss every day because Friday we had classes early morning, it was 9:00 AM. So again, the cost was like double, you know, like around £50!” (Leila, 18, Interview, interview)

“It could just be one lecture and I'm paying all that money. It's kind of like, is it worth it to go? And if you're late, is it worth it to go?” (Nico, 20, Interview)

In contrast, classes in the late afternoon were problematic due to darkness and concerns about person safety (withheld for review). Again, this could lead to participants missing certain events if surrounding mobilities might put them in situations that did not feel safe.

“I have two lecture that starts at 5pm. One of them ends at 7pm. The other one ends at 6pm, or something like that. I've honestly skipped a lot of those lectures just simply because of the fact that it's so late and it was during wintertime” (Ivy, 19, Interview)

The decision to miss a particular class, however, was not always in the hands of participants. To reiterate, participants regularly experienced transportation issues. Depending on the severity of these issues, participants could find themselves unable to get to campus. And though lectures could be caught up online, this was not true of all events. For Vera (18, Interview), the imagined possibility of missing exams due to commuting troubles was something that weighed on her mind.

“It really scares me ... If I arrive late, they'll just make me do whatever's left; they won't give me extra time. Or they'll close the doors after a certain point, so I can't go inside (Vera, 18, Interview)

The experience of commuting to and from university, and the various pressures this introduced, not only affected timetabled teaching events, but also extracurricular activities. Many participants expressed a general sense of disconnection from the university owing to their inability to attend social events (Thomas, 2020). Much like afternoon classes, social events were routinely timetabled over weekends or in the evening (Maslin, 2025), which presented a more pronounced problem for participants because of their gender identity (Currie, 1994)—and one they did not wish to negotiate through workarounds (Maslin, 2025).

“If there's an event that's late at night, I won't generally go because I don't love to travel at night” (Juno, 18, Interview)

In a similar vein, if extracurricular events were scheduled on days when participants did not have other classes, the commitment was seen as involving too much time and money. This touches on another aspect of university life for many commuter students: the desire to get home as quickly as possible either after class or having completed enough work for the day. For these participants, their need to get home could exacerbate an already mounting challenge to feeling like they belonged. As Vera comments while reflecting on university life as a commuter student.

“We were all just so used to getting home. That was our only target. So, we kind of forgot to have fun” (Vera, 18, Interview)

The general sense of detachment we have alluded to above leads us on to our final finding. Many participants felt that friendships were harder to establish as a commuter student at university. For participants, friendships were impacted in two ways. First, friendships were more difficult to establish than it would be if participants were to live on campus.

“If you live with each other or you see each other around way before, then you're gonna have that connection” (Cleo, 19, Interview)

“I'm missing a lot of that time socialising because I'm travelling ... it's a lot more difficult” (Tara, 20, Interview)

As Tara explains, part of the problem is the time spent traveling; time that could otherwise have been spent socialising. And this situation was not helped by the fact many participants saw university as a place of work, rather than a place to have fun. Second, participants spoke of maintaining their social lives outside of university, which then seemingly made them more reluctant to establish and maintain new friendships (Maslin, 2025).

In this section, we have moved beyond commuting challenges to focus on the ways in which travelling in and out of campus can shape the educational experience of participants. In doing so, we have highlighted a suite of issues related to energy, attendance, progression and sociality.

Conclusion

Our research casts a much-needed light on the everyday mobilities of women commuter students in several ways (Holton and Finn, 2018). We demonstrate the complexity of associated journeys, which routinely comprise multiples modes of transportation. Mobilities are exacerbated by a range of additional factors (Simpson and Burnett, 2019). This includes the cost of travel, the time and season, alongside the likelihood of transportation issues (Drex, 2024). Our study underlines the gendered nature of these concerns (Currie, 1994), with participants choosing to miss certain classes rather than travel home in the dark (withheld for review). These factors can be especially problematic when it comes academic events that cannot be missed are caught up online, such as exams. In these instances, participants routinely chose to leave earlier, often at greater expense, to limit the risk of nonattendance.

Our research illuminates the varied spaces that participants negotiate when they commute to university (Sheller and Urry, 2006). Mobile settings, such as trains, are routinely hot, unventilated, overcrowded and comprise passengers engaging in antisocial behaviour. Negotiation also involve a range of “embodied dispositions” (Jensen, Sheller and Wind, 2015) performed to provide participants with some semblance of control as they traverse these settings (withheld for review). Participants would routinely utilise technologies, such as headphones, to signal to others that they did not want to be disturbed (Hardley and Richardson, 2021). The intensity of performances was dependent on participants’ “visceral reaction” (Jensen, Sheller and Wind, 2015) to their surroundings, other passengers, and how familiar participants were with these spaces. Importantly, the necessity of these negotiations was interpreted as being an overlooked feature of urban spaces for women students (Cresswell and Uteng, 2008).

Importantly, our research indicates that everyday mobilities not only guide when and how participants participate on campus (Simpson and Burnett, 2019) but can also configure “patterns of interaction” (Tinto, 1997) that are forged within the “embodied dispositions” (Jensen, Sheller and Wind, 2015) of these movements. This can be observed in two ways. First, the enduring vigilance that underpin commuter mobilities can cause fatigue, leaving participants with less energy to engage in class. Second, negotiated spaces frequently involve participants actively disengaging from other passengers. It is precisely these corporeal and imaginative mobilities (Sheller and Urry, 2006) that can intersect with educational settings in a manner at odds with the participatory disposition required.

Echoing surrounding studies, our research confirms that commuter students routinely favour quiet settings (Regalado and Smale, 2015; Couture, 2018). This proclivity could be interpreted as commensurate with the kind of academic prioritisation associated with this population (Thomas,

2020). Yet, this inclination evidently comes with compromises. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a lack of sociability was a recurring aspect of university life (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022; Thomas, 2020). Participants would routinely miss events rather than travel home after dark—and these were events that participants wanted to attend. In either case, gender played an important part in these decisions (Richardson and Hardley, 2021). Reluctance to attend social events correlatively made it more challenging to either make or maintain new friendships (Thomas, 2020), which led some participants to feel disconnected from their institution (Baker et al., 2020; Hallam, 2023).

In sum, our research has explored a range of issues that women commuter students experience during their everyday mobilities. However, we do not suggest that these experiences are inherent features of commuting to campus (see Maslin, 2025); rather, they are potential features.

Living near to or traveling through inner London, for instance, will likely be associated with a different set of challenges than those faced by commuter students attending urban universities in more remote or rural places, where public transportation might be less reliable or readily available.

In turn, better understanding these experiences adds much needed nuance to extant comprehensions of commuter students. This leads us on to an additional contribution of this study. For many participants, as outlined above, their perceived connection to campus was problematised by the challenges of making and maintaining social connections while living beyond student-based accommodation. These challenges were heightened by decisions to avoid certain social events due to concerns about traveling at particular times. In these instances, suitable workarounds were seemingly viewed as insurmountable (Maslin, 2025).

Regardless of the depth of these challenges, participants routinely judged their limited time on campus through imagined comparisons with other students, who had chosen a different and perhaps more traditional educational experience. For these participants, the kind of dynamic and social campus discussed by Tinto (1975)—a life they seemingly believed both existed but was somehow inaccessible to them—became a self-fulfilling prophecy that haunted their educational lives. Crucially, we contend that surfacing of these lifeworlds not only reveals tensions between student mobilities and education engagement but also highlights the ways in which the deficit narrative can inadvertently reproduce the kind of deficiencies it was encoded to address. Accordingly, we argue the value of these insights lies in the development of commensurate forms of support, rather than reinforcing antiquated narrative that may conceal the very nuance that institutions need to help commuter students belong.

There are no competing interests to report.

Data from this study are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions involving participant confidentiality and privacy. Data may be made available from the corresponding author upon request.

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