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Wayfaring and the City:

Understanding How Commuter Students' Daily Mobilities Can Shape Their Higher Education Experience

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Executive Summary

In the UK, going to university traditionally involved students moving away from their home and living in campus-based accommodation. Today, the number of students who choose to live at home during their studies is on the rise. Commuter students—as they are commonly referred to—account for roughly 40% of undergraduates in full-time higher education. This shift away from relocation can be attributed to a suite of factors, including policy initiatives to widen participation, the replacement of maintenance grants with student loans, and mounting tuition fees. These factors also shape the socio-economic circumstances of commuter students, who tend to come from lower socio-economic backgrounds, state schools, and ethnic minority groups.

Despite their growing presence, commuter students are routinely overlooked and erroneously considered immobile. This view, of course, ignores the very real impact frequent travel can have on the educational experience of commuter students, stemming from their reduced academic and social integration. In comparison to their residential counterparts, these students are associated with lower levels of success and retention. Though the everyday mobilities of commuter students are directly related to academic and social challenges, very little is known about the lived experience of commuting and how associated mobilities can shape their educational journeys. This gap is striking, especially given the gendered nature of urban space, and the fear women routinely face moving through municipal settings.

Drawing on an original research project that utilised a bespoke chatbot alongside semi-structured interviews, our findings reveal the complexity of commuting to and from university, the impact financial burdens can have on attendance patterns, gendered concerns related to personal safety, and the educational effect of time constraints. Women students actively negotiate these challenges by modifying their behaviours and schedules. Importantly, our research highlights that everyday mobilities extend beyond the physical sites of travel. Long and stressful journeys leave students with less energy, just as actively disengaging from other passengers for extended periods can make it more difficult for students to shift into a participatory mindset when in class. We refer to this process as *dissonant mobilities*. Our research also finds that commuter students prioritise their academic work over social integration. As a result, quiet environments, such as libraries that enable students to focus on their work when on campus, are favoured. This preference, however, comes at a cost. Students routinely feel cut off from on-campus communities.

In short, our study casts a meaningful light on the everyday mobilities of commuter students. For many, this is not simply a logistical aspect of university life but a deeply embedded feature of their educational experience. To foster inclusivity and forge an environment that is more equipped to support this growing number of students, universities should spend additional time understanding these mobilities. This comprehension can be used to create co-designed educational spaces, as well as class-based activities that facilitate deep learning and help more firmly integrate students into the academic and social systems that underpin higher education. Future research should continue to examine the gendered challenges of frequent travel and how institutions can use this knowledge to create more equitable learning environments.

Background information - Commuter Students, Everyday Mobilities and Educational Challenges

Travelling to and from campus is an unavoidable aspect of university life for a growing number of students who choose to live at home during term time and commute. This is not to suggest, however, that commuting is a uniform experience for all students. A range of factors, such as public transport availability, the time and season of travel, mean the logistics and practicalities of commuting can greatly vary. Likewise, different modes of transport (e.g., walking or catching a train) can elicit different emotional dispositions (Jensen, Sheller and Wind, 2015), and influence perceptions of personal safety (Newbold, 2015). Such concerns can be particularly impactful for women students, who might feel more at risk as they move through urban spaces (Saker, Mercea and Myers, 2024). Unlike residential students, commuter students are also associated with a range of work and family-related commitments that can exacerbate the already challenging nature of frequent travel (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022).

In response to this, commuter students are routinely compelled to think carefully about how they manage their time while on campus (Simpson and Burnett, 2019). Such decisions, however, can have far-reaching consequences when it comes to their educational lives. Tinto's (1975) seminal understanding of higher education and the importance of both social and academic integration is helpful here. Social integration refers to a student's sense of belonging, fostered through peer interactions, extracurricular activities, and faculty engagement (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022). In contrast, academic integration is linked to intellectual development and academic performance (ibid). Research indicates that students who feel more connected to their institution and engage actively in campus life are more likely to continue their studies and report higher levels of satisfaction (Thomas and Galambos, 2004). That is to say, both social and academic integration are crucial for persistence in higher education (Tinto, 1993). Such integration, however, is understandably more challenging for commuter students.

Commuter students routinely prioritise academic work over social activities while at university (Thomas, 2020). Consequently, these students gravitate toward quiet spaces such as libraries, which allow them to focus on their studies (Lower, Miller, and Moffett, 2018). While this penchant might permit students to perform comparably to their residential counterparts, it comes at a cost (Thomas, 2019). These students are often less socially integrated than those students who live on campus. This lack of integration can form a cycle of disengagement (Thomas, 2020), which can shape how these students experience a sense of belonging (Tinto, 1975). Significantly, belonging is a key psychological factor in student persistence (Ahn and David, 2020). In contrast to residential students whose university housing extends their academic environment (Stalmirska and Mellon, 2022), commuter students may feel less able to fully engage with all aspects of their education. This sense of exclusion can, then, lead to the perception that their institution is indifferent to their needs (Kirk and Lewis, 2015).

Moving forward, then, commuting can have a significant impact on the educational experience of commuter students (Hallam, 2023). Commuting is associated with higher dropout rates and poorer academic performance. Research in London, for instance, identifies an inverse relationship between commuting time and retention (London Higher, 2019). The same relationship is also true of success. Related studies have found that students who live more than 30 minutes from their institution are less likely to succeed than those students who live closer (Dante, Fabris and Palese, 2013). Such findings highlight the extent to which mobility is not merely a logistical concern but a variable that can dramatically influence educational success (Kenyon, 2011).

Despite its significance, the qualitative experience of commuter mobilities remains underexplored. This is because commuter students are incorrectly perceived as immobile (Holdsworth, 2009), due to their decision not to relocate during term time. Mobilities literature helps address this misconception. Following this vein, travel does not simply involve ambulating from one place to another but can actively shape the identities of commuters and how they experience space and place (Shelly and Urry, 2006). Gender plays an important role in these everyday movements. It can influence how students navigate their surroundings, use public transport, and inhabit university campuses, just as it can reinforce existing inequalities, and shape how connected students feel to their institutions.

In sum, as commuter students continue to grow in number it is increasingly important to gain a better understanding of how the everyday mobilities of these students can influence concomitant educational experiences. Likewise, as a growing body of research continues to highlight the gendered nature of urban space, it becomes similarly important to better understand how women students navigate their surroundings, and how these negotiations might shape their educational lives. Addressing this gap is the primary aim of this research, which seeks to explore how women commuter students experience surrounding mobilities, and how these movements affect their academic and social integration.

Aims and Objectives

Aims

Our project will inform the policy of governing institutional (UUK) and student bodies (City, University of London Students' Union). It will establish the role situated data can play in the context of education, and the provision of constructively aligned support for commuter students who do not live on-campus.

The project aims to:

1. Explore the lived experiences of commuter students attending a city-based university and examine how commuting shapes academic and social integration.
2. Investigate the challenges faced by commuter students, particularly regarding financial constraints, time pressures, and personal safety concerns.
3. Analyse how gender influences the navigation of urban commuting spaces and its impact on student participation and well-being.
4. Contribute to institutional discussions on widening participation by highlighting the structural barriers that commuter students face.
5. Bring together academic research collaboration with sector guidance, in the form of UUK. A future project would need the cooperation of all partners to upscale and become sector-wide. The proposed study accordingly tests the feasibility of this.

Objectives

The objectives are as follows:

1. **Examine Student Mobilities:** Investigate the everyday commuting patterns of students to consider how these mobilities might influence academic attendance engagement.
2. **Identify Barriers to Success:** Explore the key challenges commuter students face and assess their impact on associated educational outcomes.
3. **Analyse Gendered Experiences:** Consider how women navigate urban environments.
4. **Evaluate Student Coping Strategies:** Understand how students negotiate the challenges of commuting, including behavioural adaptations and spatial preferences on campus.
5. **Assess Institutional Support Needs:** Examine how universities currently accommodate commuter students and propose recommendations for creating more inclusive educational environments.
6. **Inform Policy and Practice:** Use research findings to offer evidence-based recommendations for policymakers and higher education institutions to enhance the commuter student experience.

For a full breakdown of the methodology used to gather the data, see Appendix One

Key Findings

Commuting can be complex and involve several modes of transportation. Factors, such as the cost, time of travel, season (e.g., during the winter months it gets darker earlier on), alongside delays and disruptions, can exacerbate this practice. In a similar vein, delays and disruptions can make attendance more difficult, which can lead to students missing certain events. The prospect of this was particularly stressful if events were directly related to progression and success (e.g., exams). In either case, students would often choose to travel earlier than required, at greater expense, to limit these concerns.

Gender exacerbates the varied challenges associated with commuting. Concerns surrounding traveling after dark can culminate in students not attending extracurricular events. The vigilance required to negotiate the environments that comprise everyday mobilities can shape the mobility choices of women students, limiting participation on campus.

Public transport can be overcrowded, poorly ventilated, and implicate antisocial behaviour. In response to these spaces, students develop strategies to maintain some sense of control over their surroundings. For example, some students wear headphones to communicate to other passengers that they do not want to be disturbed. These behaviours can become more intense as students negotiate unfamiliar spaces.

Commuting can affect academic engagement. Long and stressful journeys can leave students feeling fatigued, and less able to participate in class-based activities. Importantly, the desire to disengage from other passengers in transit (e.g., by avoiding eye contact and limiting interactions) can carry over into the classroom, with students feeling less able to adopt a participatory mindset. We refer to this process as *dissonant mobilities*. Importantly, our study finds that commuting spaces are not separate from educational spaces. Instead, the experience of travel can readily influence how students inhabit and engage within university environments.

Commuter students prefer quiet study environments. While on campus, commuter students frequently choose to inhabit quiet, low-stimulations spaces, such as libraries, which allow them to focus on their work. On the one hand, this preference allows students to focus on their academic work while in university, which is a recurring penchant of commuter students. On the other, this preference may further isolate students from campus life, which might limit their sense of belonging.

Commuter students are less able to take part in extracurricular activities, which can limit their sense of belonging. Many commuter students opt out of extracurricular activities and social events precisely because they are scheduled in the evening, which would require students to commute home, after dark and possibly alone. Gender plays an important role in social disengagement, with safety concerns discouraging participation in communal gatherings. Such reluctance to engage makes it harder for commuter students to form and maintain friendships, which can contribute to feelings of disconnection from university life.

Institutional adaptation is needed. Simply increasing commuter student enrolment does not ensure an equitable university experience. Institutions should develop a deeper understanding of how everyday mobilities shape academic and social engagement. Institutions should spend additional time engaging with commuter students to co-design study spaces that are commensurate with the needs of these students. Likewise, digital technologies should be better utilised to offer flexible forms of participation that can provide important points of connection when students are not on campus. Equally, future research should examine location-specific and gendered commuting challenges to inform targeted institutional support.

Recommendations

Our findings highlight a range of challenges faced by commuter students, pointing to several key recommendations for institutional change, digital innovation, and inclusive practice:

Rethink the Scheduling of Key Academic Events. Universities should ensure important academic activities, such as exams or graded presentations are scheduled, where possible, in the middle of the day. Doing so will make it easier for students who live considerable distances from campus to attend. Likewise, this will safeguard against transport disruptions at either the beginning or end of the day.

Enhance Digital Access. Where possible, students should be given the option to participate in scholarly events online. In a similar vein, students should be given the option to asynchronously discuss events through platforms such as Microsoft Teams or Moodle.

Co-Design Inclusive, Low-Stimulation Study Spaces. Commuter students frequently seek quiet, low-stimulation environments while on campus. Universities should, therefore, invest in the creation of safe, comfortable, and inclusive study spaces that support academic work, while allowing students to relax after periods of travel. These spaces should be co-designed with commuter students to ensure they reflect actual needs and preferences.

Acknowledge and Address Gendered Safety Concerns. Scheduling extracurricular and social events during daylight hours can significantly improve accessibility for commuter students. This is especially the case for women students who may feel unsafe traveling after dark and while alone. As a corollary to this, Universities should also promote the development of societies and clubs that operate in daytime hours, as well as offering the option to participate online.

Promote Awareness and Understanding of the Commuter Experience. Universities must build a deeper institutional understanding of how commuting impacts academic engagement. Staff should be trained to recognise the effects of "dissonant mobilities", which we define as being the lingering emotional and cognitive impact of difficult commutes and adopt inclusive classroom practices that ease the transition into academic life upon arrival.

Support Safe Travel and Report Antisocial Behaviour. Institutions should create safe channels through which students can report issues experienced on their commute, including antisocial behaviour. Collaborating with local authorities to monitor problematic routes, and providing safety tips and travel guidance, would contribute to a more supportive travel environment.

Foster a Sense of Community and Belonging Digitally. To counter feelings of disconnection, institutions should develop dedicated digital spaces for commuter students. This could include peer support networks, virtual social hubs, and online platforms offering travel information, event listings, and opportunities for informal connection. Such efforts would help foster a stronger sense of belonging and inclusion.

Inform National Policy Through Sector Collaboration. The insights from this research should inform broader policy conversations. Bodies such as Universities UK (UUK), the Office for Students (OfS), and other higher education sector partners should use these findings to encourage institutions to better understand the commuter student experience and translate that understanding into responsive, evidence-based policy development.

Appendix One - Methodology

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—who identify as women enrolled at an urban university. To be clear, we define commuter students as students who do not move away to live on campus-based accommodation during term time. 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 included 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). Seventeen participants were full-time students, and two participants did not provide this information. All participants were undergraduates. All participants identified as women. In the following sections, we outline the methods used, and how data were analysed.

Chatbot data

In total, 19 participants used our chatbot for a period of one week during the spring term. From Monday to Friday, participants were asked to log how they commuted to and from campus. We were chiefly interested in the different modes of transportation participants utilised (e.g., walking to the station, catching a train, then the Tube and finally walking to campus). The chatbot also provided a space for participants to record any comments or photographs/videos they might want to share about their everyday mobilities.

Our chatbot was developed using Flow XO, an 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 of participants in situ hinged on a desire for ecological validity, mitigating the biases 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 a comment, photographs and videos. In other words, our use of these methods resonates with how locative media has traditionally been used (Saker, Mercea, and Myers 2024)

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 experiences and challenges of commuting to and from campus, how the spaces that comprise these mobilities were navigated, and finally how these movements shaped

the academic and social integration of participants. 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). In line with 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. This was done by comparing the codes for both interview and chatbot data.

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