Homeward Bound: Defining, understanding and aiding 'commuter students'

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Cover image by Rachel Hewitt

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Introduction

The great majority of the UK's political and policy leaders experienced higher education as a residential student: they left the parental or family home to go to live and study at university.[1] They typically enjoyed a completely integrated and immersive academic, social and cultural experience that meshed academic study with co-curricular, social and sporting activities. They lived for three or so years in a higher education bubble, largely insulated from the world they left behind. They built lifelong networks and friendships, expanded their social capital, and progressed into excellent employment outcomes.

But for a significant minority of today's students, higher education is experienced differently. According to the Sutton Trust, a quarter of today's students live at home and commute to study at university.[2] In some parts of the country, especially major cities, the proportion is higher. As this paper demonstrates, these so-called commuter students do not always have such rounded and fulfilling experiences as other students, and they sometimes do not benefit from their higher education as much as those students who reside at university.

In terms of student residency, the UK, and particularly England, is an international outlier because commuting is not the norm. In many countries, university students are encouraged to attend their local university and to stay in the family home. Living at home and commuting to university is standard across much of Europe.[3] In Australia, geography helps to dictate that students tend to study within their home state or city, maintaining pre-existing social networks rather than forging new ones.[4]

Relocating to university is a distinctive feature of UK higher education and it confers many advantages for our students and universities. However, it is comparatively expensive for individuals and the state, and benefits most those with the financial wherewithal, social flexibility and confidence to make such a big life change.[5]

There is evidence to suggest that, compared to residential students, commuter students obtain poorer outcomes from their higher education, and will be less engaged and satisfied with their academic experiences. The reasons for this are many and complex. Commuter students can find the cost, time and unpredictability of commuting affects their ability to study and engage, often exacerbated by a higher probability that they will work part-time, or have family or carer responsibilities. The best available evidence suggests that commuter students are also more likely to be the first generation in their families to enter higher education, have a lower income, be mature and be from an ethnic minority background. In England, they are more likely to live and study in and around London and other large cities.

Many commuter students, however, will see advantages in continuing to live at home while studying. It allows close family, religious and community-support networks to be maintained. It can be cheaper to live at home (despite the cost of commuting) and commuters can remain in local employment. They may conceivably be less distracted by social and sporting life so concentrate more on studying. It is therefore important not to project a 'deficit model' onto students living at home and commuting long distances, and instead to ask how we might

better ensure that the wide and deep range of benefits of the higher education experience are realised for them more fully.

Policy debates about higher education, including funding strategies (such as student loans and grants) and outcome assessments (such as the Teaching Excellence Framework and league tables), typically assume the residential or 'boarding-school' model to be the norm. Indeed, the present Universities Minister, Sam Gyimah, in a speech to mark the opening of the Office for Students, even argued that universities should act *in loco parentis*.[6] This narrow view has led to neglect of commuter students in policymaking, a lack of appreciation of their impact on widely-used metrics and an under-valuing of those higher education institutions that specialise in educating them. As this paper demonstrates, there are significant implications for policy on higher education access, funding, equality and diversity, as well as assessment of universities' performance.

There is no shortage of practical matters that universities might need to consider to assist their commuter students, including:

- adapting welcome and induction activities;

- providing better advice and guidance about commuting;

- matching the curriculum and assessment models to commuter students' needs;

- organising the timetable into blocks to concentrate campus presence;

- creating an online commuter support community with activities close to commuter students' homes;

- providing useful facilities for commuters such as lockers, common rooms and kitchens;

- minimising the impact of commuting through ride-share and cycling schemes, car parking provision (where appropriate) and attention to travel safety issues; and

- providing co- and extra-curricular activities during the day or early evening so that they are more accessible to those students who go home at night.

The Government has declared its ambition to 'encourage learning that is more flexible', citing a need to improve the number of alternative pathways through higher education such as degree-apprenticeships, part-time study, and more flexible, modular provision.[7] Success in achieving these policy aims would necessarily increase the number of higher education students who could be described as 'commuters'. It is therefore an apt time to consider whether more could be done by policymakers and within higher education providers to ensure our education system delivers equally for students who chose not to move away from home as well as those who do.

1. Defining commuter students

Interest in commuter students has grown in recent years. A growing body of research, data and comment has begun to illuminate our understanding of commuter students, which we will draw upon in this paper.

However, we still know relatively little about commuter students, and there is limited comprehensive or systematic data that can help us understand them properly. Few universities are aware of the precise number of commuter students they have, what their characteristics are, how they perform compared to other groups and what could be done to maximise their outcomes and experiences. By developing a better understanding of the number, nature and experience of commuter students, universities can make adjustments to help them stay and succeed.

The term 'commuter student' is itself ill-defined. It overlaps with 'local', 'bedroom', 'live at home', 'study and go' and 'off-campus'. Some restrict its use to those students that live at home and have the same home and term-time address, irrespective of the distance from the place of study.[8] The Teaching Excellence Framework uses 'local' students to mean those that live in the same travel-to-work area as their higher education provider, although the whole of London is considered a single travel-to-work area. So students can travel within a travel-to-work area for more than an hour in order to study.

We prefer a definition that gives primacy to travel to the place of study, and so define commuter students as those for whom the travel between their residence and principal study location

materially affects their ability to succeed in higher education. Their residence could be a parental / guardian home, family home or private-rented accommodation. The length of commute could vary considerably from 30 minutes to well in excess of an hour, but the key issue is that the student's educational opportunity is materially affected in some way by the commute. Travel affects students in different ways: it may be the cost or time of travel, the difficulty or cost of parking and / or safety concerns (especially on dark evenings).

These issues will impact different students in different ways: one student's enjoyable, regular and productive journey to university of 60 minutes is another's nightmare and highly disruptive commute of 45 minutes. Commuting can vary considerably from day to day, and term to term. All this pre-supposes that the educational model is face-to-face at a physical higher education location, although it should be acknowledged that online, distance learning is growing, and that the development of blended combinations of online and face-to-face teaching and learning practices may be one way to improve the experience of commuter students.

Alongside travel, the second common characteristic of commuter students is their greater likelihood of cohabiting and spending time out of study with non-students, often extended family or close community members. It is also likely they will have more work, social, cultural or religious commitments beyond their status as a student. Commuter students are therefore more likely to be isolated from other students outside formal classes. Again, the key issue is that a student's overall educational experience may be adversely affected by the lack of

out-of-class interactions, limited ability to participate in group work, integration with fellow students and academics and the inability to participate fully in extra-curricular opportunities typically considered a core part of the traditional UK university experience. The cohort effect of students forming a bonded group which facilitates mutual learning and support through shared university academic and non-academic experiences should not be underestimated.

We have combined these two key factors of distance from place of study and cohabitation to produce a taxonomy of commuter students. It could also be described as a 'risk map' of the likelihood that student success might be disrupted by commuting.

Taxonomy of commuter student types

	Close to place of study	Distant from place of study
Cohabit with other students	**'Typical' residential student** Higher social engagement potential Lower travel disruption potential	**'Social' commuter student** Higher social engagement potential Higher travel disruption potential
Lives alone or cohabits with non-students (eg parents, family etc)	**'Home' commuter student** Medium / lower social engagement potential Lower travel disruption potential	**'Higher-risk' commuter student** Lower social engagement potential Higher travel disruption potential

These challenges affecting commuter students intersect with other characteristics that we already know impact students' experiences and outcomes. Evidence suggests that commuter students are more likely to: work part-time; have family or carer responsibilities; be the first generation in their family to attend higher education; be from a lower socio-economic group; have a low income; be mature; and have a BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) background.[9] They are also more likely to be students in Greater London, Merseyside and the North East and to be studying subjects such as Education, Subjects Allied to Medicine, Business and Administration, Mathematics, Computer Science and Social Studies.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to untangle the impact of each of these characteristics from the significance of a commute. For policymakers, there is also significantly more information about students' residence than their daily travel times, much of which we will draw upon in the rest of this paper. The everyday mobility of commuter students is in effect a complex negotiation of student and non-student lives.[10]

2. Who are commuter students and how many are there?

There is a range of datasets available that cover students who might fully or partially fit our definition of commuter students.

2.1 Historic data

In the middle years of the twentieth century, the University Grants Committee recorded data on the number of university students living in the parental home. According to these data, the proportion of students living in the parental home was at its highest immediately before and after the Second World War, reflecting the locally-focused recruitment of Scottish universities and Victorian redbrick institutions founded in industrial cities.
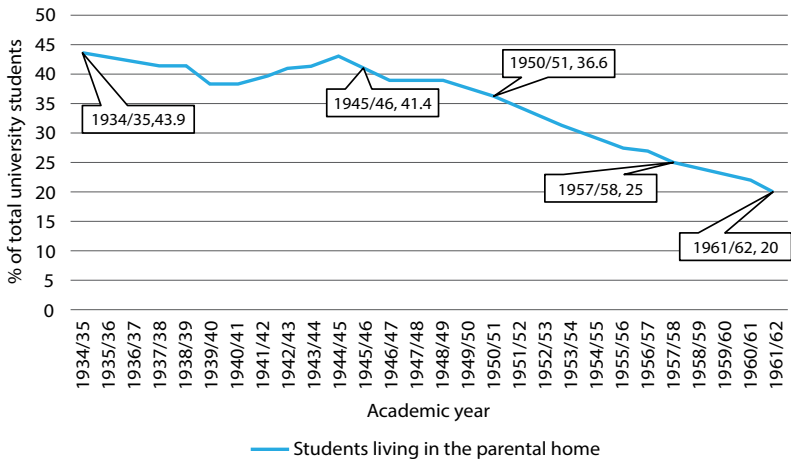
Source: From David Malcolm, *"More Difficult": Institutional policy and practice in relation to students living in the parental home during study*, 2014

The number of students living in the parental home declined from the 1950s to the 1980s, as higher education participation expanded and new universities were founded with a residential ethos. 'Plate glass' institutions, such as York, Lancaster and Warwick, were built on out-of-town campuses with an expectation of a residential student experience.
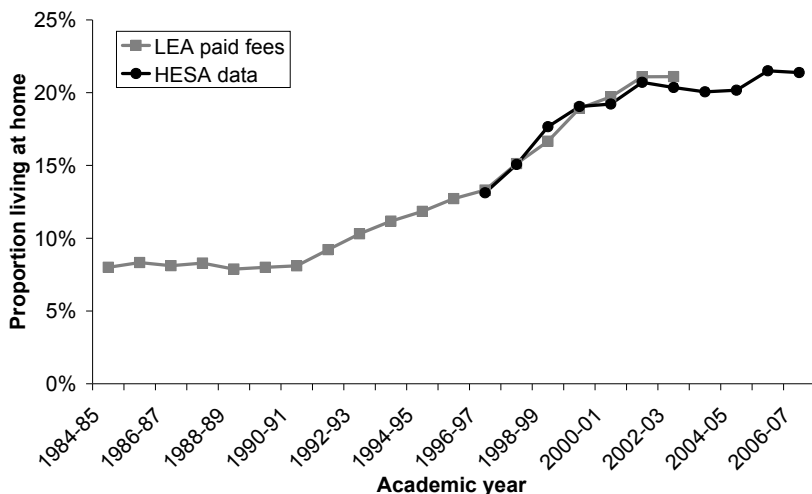
Source: Patterns in higher education: living at home, HEFCE (2009), p.11

Data collected by local authorities and subsequently by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) show the proportion of students living at home climbed again following the conversion of polytechnics to university status in 1992 and the new wave of higher education expansion in the late-1990s and 2000s. However, it has not reached the levels of the pre-war period. Since 2005, the number of students living in the parental home as recorded by HESA has remained steadily around 20 to 25 per cent.

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2.2 HESA residence data

HESA's student record includes data from higher education institutions on students' term-time accommodation. The record subdivides accommodation into seven different categories, plus a 'Not Available' group:

1. Provider maintained property

2. Parental / guardian home

3. Not in attendance at the provider

4. Own residence

5. Other rented accommodation

6. Private-sector halls

7. Other

Michael Donnelly and Sol Gamsu's analysis of student mobility only classifies students in the 'Parental / guardian home' category as 'commuters' and the rest are said to be 'movers'. UK-wide, 15.5 per cent of students are classified as living in their 'own residence' by HESA. However, in many cases, students living in their 'own residence' – particularly mature students – might be better classed as commuters. Those living in 'other rented accommodation' may also be better classed as commuters, if for example they are living in this accommodation prior to commencing their studies. Confusion as to the interpretation of students living in their 'own residence' might therefore leave the 'Parental / guardian home' category as a slightly less reliable

proxy for 'commuter' students than is assumed in Donnelly and Gamsu's otherwise illuminating typology.

Analysis of the data suggests that interpretation of the categories might vary between different institutions. Providers such as London South Bank University or Birkbeck, University of London, both of which have significant proportions of part-time students (a majority in the case of Birkbeck), do and might be expected to have a high proportion of students living in their 'own residence', many of which might fit the definition of 'commuters'.

On the other hand, the University of East Anglia (UEA) and the University of Liverpool appear to classify students living in private rented accommodation in the 'own residence' category as well, given the unexpectedly high proportions for these two institutions. Most other institutions appear to have used the classification 'Other Rented Accommodation'. However they are categorised by HESA, we would expect many of these students at universities such as UEA and Liverpool to fit the category of 'movers', rather than 'commuters'.

The HESA data also show substantial variations in accommodation patterns between regions, with students more likely to live in the parental home in Northern Ireland, the West Midlands and London.

A 2017 report from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) highlighted the challenge of keeping data on students' term-time accommodation up-to-date, particularly as the information can change beyond the HESA census date.[11]

Top 20 UK higher education institutions by percentage of full-time, UK domiciled, undergraduate students classified as living in 'Parental/guardian home'

Provider name	Parental/guardian home	
Newman University	1,170	64.5%
City, University of London	3,655	63.9%
Glasgow Caledonian University	6,290	60.1%
The University of the West of Scotland	5,750	57.8%
Scotland's Rural College	690	53.6%
The University of Wolverhampton	6,575	53.4%
Middlesex University	5,440	53.1%
The University of Westminster	5,365	52.7%
Ravensbourne	1,040	52.6%
The University of Bradford	3,475	52.5%
The University of Sunderland	3,545	49.6%
University of the Highlands and Islands	2,470	48.8%
Queen Mary University of London	4,435	47.1%
The University of East London	3,765	44.1%
University of the West of England, Bristol	7,130	43.9%
Birmingham City University	6,635	42.8%
Staffordshire University	3,520	41.9%
St Mary's University, Twickenham	1,475	41.8%
Teesside University	3,665	41.4%
University College Birmingham	1,250	41.2%

Source: HESA Student Record [2015-16]. Copyright Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited. Excludes providers with under 1000 UK undergraduate full-person equivalent.

Top 20 UK higher education institutions by percentage of full-time, UK domiciled, undergraduate students classified as living in 'Own residence'

Provider name	Own residence	
London South Bank University	6,295	82.3%
Birkbeck, University of London	1,855	72.5%
University of Abertay Dundee	1,670	53.7%
The University of East Anglia	4,630	52.3%
University of the Highlands and Islands	2,315	45.8%
University of Bedfordshire	3,365	45.1%
The University of Liverpool	6,255	45.0%
The University of Bolton	1,640	44.1%
University of Suffolk	1,515	43.0%
Wrexham Glyndŵr University	1,125	42.7%
London Metropolitan University	2,920	38.5%
The University of West London	2,385	37.6%
Anglia Ruskin University	4,570	35.7%
University of Worcester	2,520	35.2%
The University of Hull	3,670	35.1%
The University of the West of Scotland	3,070	30.9%
London School of Economics	685	28.9%
The University of Northampton	2,305	28.5%
University of Plymouth	4,490	28.5%
St George's, University of London	645	27.7%

Source: HESA Student Record [2015-16]. Copyright Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited. Excludes providers with under 1000 UK undergraduate full-person equivalent.

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Top 20 UK higher education institutions by percentage of full-time, UK domiciled, undergraduate students classified as living in 'Provider maintained property' and 'Private sector halls'

Provider name	Provider and private halls	
The University of Cambridge	8,385	89.1%
The University of Oxford	7,470	80.1%
Aberystwyth University	2,995	53.5%
The University of Lancaster	3,480	52.5%
The University of Warwick	4,545	46.8%
The University of Lincoln	4,310	46.8%
Loughborough University	4,810	42.6%
Coventry University	6,075	40.5%
University of Durham	4,260	39.9%
The University of Edinburgh	5,720	39.2%
Bangor University	2,535	38.8%
The Royal Veterinary College	580	38.6%
Keele University	2,400	38.5%
The University of Reading	3,115	38.3%
The Nottingham Trent University	7,595	38.1%
The University of York	3,915	37.2%
The University of Birmingham	6,440	36.7%
The University of Aberdeen	2,440	35.9%
Brunel University London	2,685	35.1%
The University of Manchester	7,065	34.9%

Source: HESA Student Record [2015-16]. Copyright Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited. Excludes providers with under 1000 UK undergraduate full-person equivalent.

ONS's concern is primarily related to the use of HESA data in verifying local population statistics, but illustrates the challenges of recording and categorising students' accommodation choices and making inferences regarding their experiences from them. Further evidence of the unreliability of this dataset has been suggested by some university planning departments, who have noted that students' term-time accommodation may not be confirmed when the data is submitted, and may not be subsequently updated.[12]

HESA has recently concluded a consultation reviewing the term-time accommodation dataset, acknowledging that 'the current valid entries in the … field are confusing and don't clearly identify what should be recorded in each category'. HESA has proposed a new set of term-time accommodation categories, which should assist in clarifying the nature of student residences in UK higher education.[13]

2.3 Sutton Trust mobility analysis

Based on a study of HESA data from 2009/10 and 2014/15, Donnelly and Gamsu divide students into six categories based on the distances they commute to university (live in the family home) or move (living in another form of accommodation, such as provider-maintained property, other rented accommodation, private-sector halls, or private rented housing).

In 2014/15, over three-quarters of the student body at the University of the West of Scotland (77.5 per cent), and Newman University (76.2 per cent) in Birmingham come from less than 91 kilometres away and also lived in their parental home. At these institutions and many others (City University – 71.3 per

cent, University of Sunderland – 63.2 per cent), short distance commuting from the family home is the norm. This compares to under 2 per cent of students at the Universities of Bath, Bristol, Durham, York and Exeter.

UK student commuters and movers for 2014/15[14]

Distance	Commuter	Mover
Short (0-91km)	23.3%	32.5%
Medium (91-244 km)	1.2%	31.5%
Long (+244 km)	0.3%	10.9%
Total	24.8%	74.4%

The analysis shows big variations in the proportion of commuter students at different universities and between different social classes and UK regions. Students in the most disadvantaged social class are three times more likely to be short-distance commuters than those in the highest social class. Students from ethnic minorities are also more likely to be short-distance commuters, with 71.1 per cent of British Bangladeshi and 65.9 per cent of British Pakistani students falling into this category, compared to only 18.8 per cent of white British students.

The distance categories were derived from 'natural breaks' in the statistical distribution of the data resulting in the thresholds 0-91 kilometres (0-57 miles), 91-244 kilometres (57-152 miles), and 244 kilometres (152 miles) and above. But 91 kilometres appears to be a long way to commute and greater discrimination would have been provided if the short category, which includes virtually all commuters, had been broken down further. Furthermore, as highlighted above, HESA's term-time

accommodation data may not be entirely reliable for discerning which students living in their 'own residence' might also be reasonably classified as 'commuter students'.

Overall, Donnelly and Gamsu's typology for student mobility is an illuminating contribution to understanding the numbers and characteristics of commuter students. However, it is limited by the characteristics of the data available.

2.4 HEFCE data on student and graduate mobility

Shortly before it closed down in 2018, the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) released new data on student mobility between Local Enterprise Partnerships when entering and leaving higher education.[15] The data showed:

• 30 per cent of students stay in their home Local Enterprise Partnership area for both study and employment;

• 30 per cent move to a different Local Enterprise Partnership area for study but then return to their home area for employment;

• 33 per cent leave their Local Enterprise Partnership area to study and do not return; and

• 6 per cent stay in their home Local Enterprise Partnership area for study but then move away for employment.

Though perhaps only tangentially an insight into students' experiences while at university, the HEFCE data on student and graduate mobility demonstrate the vast majority (five-sixths) of students who remain in their home Local Enterprise

Partnership to study are roughly evenly split between those who return for employment and those who do not.

2.5 Summary of data on commuter students

The available data on students' residency, parental home and distance from place of study fail to help us identify commuter students precisely. Inconsistencies in interpretations of the HESA term-time accommodation definitions prevent clear identification of whether students are cohabiting with other students, as well as the distance of their term-time accommodation from their place of study. While the data enable us to understand how many students move significant distances away from home, as shown by Donnelly and Gamsu, it does not provide a comprehensive picture.

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3. The commuter student experience

David Malcolm writes in his study of students living in the parental home:

> *The experiences of students living in the parental home [are] often hidden to universities, obscured by the more obvious administrative or pastoral needs of students living in university-owned halls or in shared accommodation in the local community.*[16]

We might argue the same for students that live in shared student accommodation but at a distance from their local university community, particularly for universities in a vast sprawling metropolis such as London. In any scenario where some students' living and travel arrangements are considered atypical – whether living a long distance from campus, cohabiting with non-students or both – these students' experiences may be more hidden from their institutions and less integrated with the rhythms of traditional student life.

3.1 The academic experience

There is evidence (including from the 2018 HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey*) to suggest that commuter students face barriers to positive engagement in crucial aspects of an effective higher education learning experience. Particular challenges appear to centre on the following areas.

3.1.1 Timetabling

Few things raise the ire of university students and staff, and yet are quite so banal, as timetabling. Students' day-to-day lives are

often structured around the timing of taught sessions, which vary considerably between different courses.

Conventional course organisation, particularly on courses with fewer than average contact hours or significant module optionality, can be quite haphazard, with taught sessions squeezed onto a timetable wherever possible. Such courses are rarely designed to offer a coherent experience for the individual student, or such cogency may simply not be possible due to the logistical challenges of university timetabling.

This can be a barrier to students who must travel significant distances to their place of study. These students might be more discerning than their closer peers when deciding whether a trip to their institution for a taught session is worthwhile: 'an isolated lecture is likely to have lower rates of attendance by commuter students'.[17] This may in turn prompt student commuters to view the 'value for money' of their taught sessions differently to their residential peers, and perhaps take a more transactional view of the nature of higher education.

3.1.2 Facilities and technology

Whereas students living in university-owned accommodation can usually rely on private social and study facilities close to their taught sessions, those travelling long distances are more reliant on the availability of communal facilities, such as libraries and designated study areas. Research has identified other facilities which are disproportionately, if not exclusively, useful to commuter students, including: car parking; crèches; communal kitchens; and private lockers.[18]

The 'sticky campus', a concept emanating originally from New Zealand – where students are much more likely to commute – encompasses the idea that all students, regardless of their living situation, should be encouraged to spend a greater proportion of their time in campus spaces beyond just formal contact hours.[19] Students living a greater distance from campuses or without student social networks would benefit most from such an arrangement.

Finally, much has been made of the potential of technology-enhanced learning for pedagogy in higher education and hopes to extend distance learning, but the continued popularity of on-campus and face-to-face provision suggests that, in spite of its recent growth, distance learning will not be the norm in higher education for many years – if ever.[20] Nonetheless, there are clearly opportunities through the development of technology-enhanced learning that might particularly support students more distant from campus. Remote (electronic) submission assignments, video-conferencing with teaching and support staff, lecture capture and remote access to specialist software could all ease the challenges faced by students for whom travel can be a barrier to studying.[21]

3.1.3 Experiences of learning

The 2017 HEPI / HEA *Student Academic Experience Survey* showed a significant nine percentage point difference in students who reported they had 'learned a lot' during their time at university, between those who lived in the family home and those who lived with other students. The survey also found that these students are also more likely to wish they had chosen another course or institution.[22]

The 2018 HEPI / Advance HE *Student Academic Experience Survey* found that 9 per cent of 'commuter students' – those who live at home with family and live more than 10 miles from their institution – would not have entered higher education if they could make their decision again, the highest of any group by accommodation choice. This group also reports the lowest perceptions of value for money.[23]

However, when the data is contextualised to take account of other factors, the relationship between student commuting, perceptions of value for money and learning gain appears to be less strong. This may be related to the facts that commuter students are more likely to be older, from ethnic minorities, the first in their family to attend higher education and to undertake part-time work during their studies. The latter factor is shown to have a significant impact on students' perceptions of value for money and learning gain.[24]

Another indicator of the impact of residence on student experience comes from the *National Student Survey (NSS)*. Our high level analysis of results from the 2016 *National Student Survey* shows, for providers in England and Wales, the proportion of students living in provider-maintained or private sector halls has a positive relationship with overall student satisfaction. Conversely, the proportion living in the parental / guardian home has a slightly negative relationship with overall satisfaction.

In the first of our two graphs, the two outlying institutions with by far the biggest majority of their students living in provider and private halls are Oxford and Cambridge.

Relationship between term-time accommodation and NSS overall satisfaction (English and Welsh providers)

R² = 0.2366

NSS Q22 2016 (y-axis: 70% to 100%)

% in provider-maintained and private halls 2015-16 (x-axis: 0% to 90%)

Relationship between term-time accommodation and NSS overall satisfaction (English and Welsh providers)

R² = 0.1365

NSS Q22 2016 (y-axis: 80% to 100%)

% in parental / guardian home 2015-16 (x-axis: 0.00% to 70.00%)
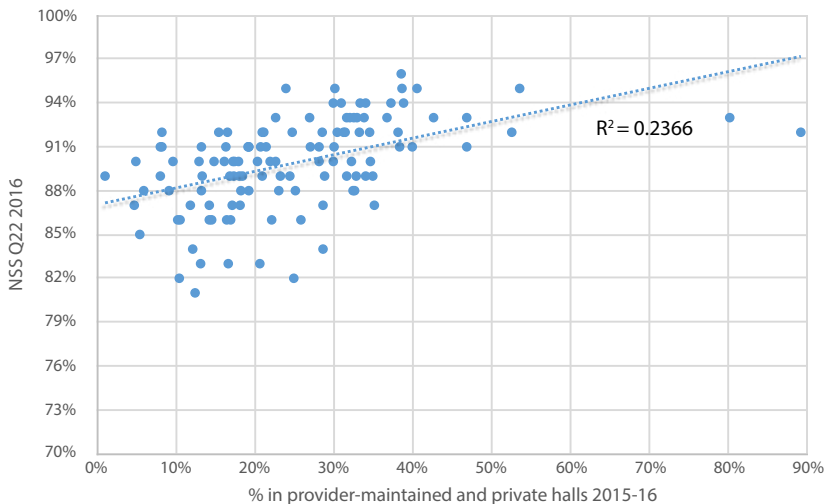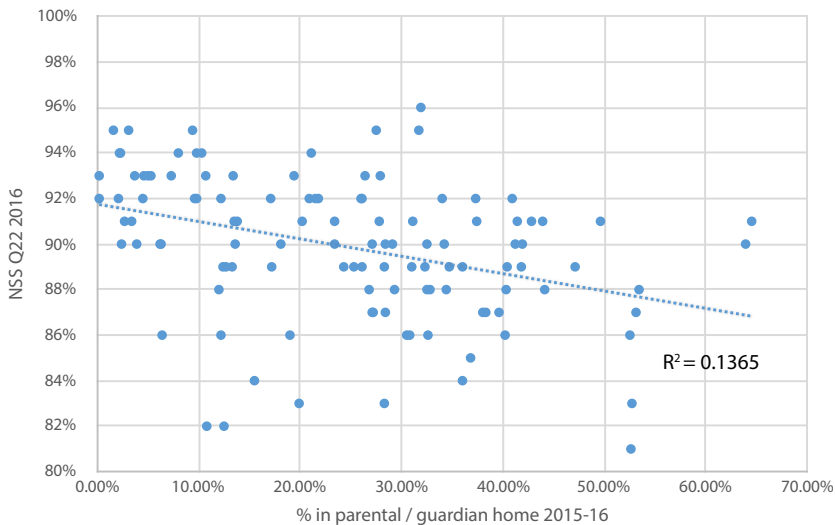
If we remove these two outliers from the data, the relationship between student satisfaction and accommodation is stronger. The other institutions towards the top right of the graph are mostly campus-based and small-town universities, such as Loughborough, Lancaster, Aberystwyth, Durham, Keele and Lincoln. Only one institution with more than 30 per cent of its students in provider and private halls had an overall *National Student Survey* satisfaction score under 88 per cent – Brunel University London (87 per cent). Conversely, institutions with poorer satisfaction scores and student accommodation skewed more towards the parental home are overwhelmingly modern and specialist universities in the heart of London.

Such findings are by no means determinative and they do not necessarily indicate a causal relationship. Nonetheless, they suggest that students' residency options and choices, and the many variables that might intersect with these (including class, ethnicity and finances), do bear some relationship to students' sense of satisfaction and happiness with their university experience. Although the strength of the association is moderate (24 per cent of the variation in NSS Q22 satisfaction is statistically explained by the % of provider maintained and private halls) it should be noted that the difference between success and failure on this question in the NSS is usually just five percentage points or so. This has clear implications for the users of NSS data, especially those that seek to contextualise the interpretations.

The mixed evidence from the HEPI / Advance HE *Survey* and *National Student Survey* suggests that more work needs to be done to disentangle the various factors that might impact

commuter students' experience of higher education on top of their travel and accommodation status, most notably their ethnicity and time spent in paid employment.

3.1.4 Academic support and retention

Challenges for improving the experiences of commuter students are closely linked to those related to student support and improving student retention. The 2017 HEPI / HEA *Student Academic Experience Survey* found 'there are sizeable variances in wellbeing related to the amount the students feel they are learning' and that students living in the parental home were more likely to report lower levels of learning.[25] However, some qualitative studies of students living in the parental home emphasise the positive effect that family support networks have.[26]

Although it is not yet proven if students living in the parental home or with long travel distances are likely to face significantly greater challenges in wellbeing or are at a greater risk of non-continuation after controlling for other factors, these students' social and living situations undoubtedly need to be considered by universities seeking to address these challenges, lest they be overlooked.

3.2 Finance

Students may often choose to commute long distances to study or to live in the parental / family home as a cost-saving measure.[27] Evidence from the National Educational Opportunities Network suggests that concerns about the cost of living might strongly influence some students' choices of subject and institution, and may be a barrier to entering their

preferable place of study, with 40 per cent of students saying that concerns about costs influence their choice of provider.[28]

This is underlined by the evidence from Donnelly and Gamsu showing students from the poorest socio-economic classes are far more likely to be commuters than their wealthier peers. However, Donnelly and Gamsu also found that between 2009 and 2015, although tuition fees and the number of higher education entrants from poorer backgrounds both increased, the number of students commuting did not increase commensurately.[29]

Student maintenance arrangements are currently based around students' residency arrangements, with students declared as 'living with their parents' eligible for a significantly smaller loan. The following table shows the maximum Maintenance Loan amounts in England for courses starting from 1 August 2016.

Students living arrangements	Maximum Maintenance Loan for the 2017/18 academic year	Maximum Maintenance Loan for the 2018/19 academic year
Living with parents	£7,079	£7,324
Studying in London and not living with parents	£11,002	£11,354
Studying outside London and not living with parents	£8,430	£8,700
Living and studying abroad for at least one term as part of their UK course	£9,654	£9,963

The assumption that students living at home will have lower living costs than those moving away underlines the assumption

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that student maintenance will be 'topped up' by parental or other support.[30]

However, for many students living at home, whether with parents or not, this may not be the case. Other policy choices, such as the ineligibility for housing and other benefits for full-time students, and real-terms erosion in supplementary forms of maintenance support such as the Parents' Learning Allowance, also disproportionally put financial pressure on commuter students. The National Union of Students has argued that there continues to be a substantial gap between student living costs and maintenance loan allowances for students both living and not living with their parents.[31]

3.3 Travel

Research in the UK and abroad has consistently shown that commuting harms general life satisfaction.[32] Though there have not been similar studies of students specifically, studies of students travelling long distances to study suggest that long-commutes can harm a students' quality of life. Long travel times can cause significant disruption to study through traffic and public transport cancellations. Late arrivals at critical teaching sessions, examinations or other learning activities can harm students' prospects and may not always be looked upon sympathetically by staff and fellow students.[33] Long travel times, particularly with large quantities of books or other equipment, can simply be tiring.

Travel also reduces students' total available time for study and for engagement with extracurricular and co-curricular activities, such as sports, societies and engagement with

employers. Students who rely on travelling to campus by car may struggle to get involved in social activities centred on alcohol consumption. There is an apparent paradox that residential students are more likely to want to maximise their total time on campus, whilst commuter students seek to minimise it due to the cost of their commute.

Most of all, extensive travel is a large expense in already stretched student budgets. While many live-at-home commuters may choose to do it to save money, students who live outside the parental home and still travel long distances to study incur a significant additional cost in comparison to their peers who live closer to campus. This is almost certainly felt most strongly by students living in London, where costs of accommodation and public transport are significantly above the national averages and affordable residences are typically a significant distance from university campuses, many of which are in central and affluent areas.[34]

3.4 Cultural values

In his controversial 2017 book *The Road to Somewhere*, Policy Exchange's David Goodhart argued that education participation and geographic mobility were two determining factors of a social-attitudes divide in the UK. Goodhart uses the term of 'anywheres' to describe those with high levels of education, who are more likely to live away from where they were born (often after initially moving away for university), and are likely to have a confident socially-liberal outlook on the world. His contrary term of 'somewheres' describes those less likely to have attended higher education, who are more likely to live in one place for most of their lives, and are more likely to

have socially-conservative attitudes and to be less comfortable with the changing world around them.

Goodhart points out that 60 per cent of Britons still live within 20 miles of where they lived when aged 14, but the proportion of graduates who live away from their mother is substantially higher than the proportion of non-graduates. The evidence suggests there are substantial variations within the student and graduate populations. Broadly, those who attend Russell Group and pre-92 institutions, particularly in provincial towns, are more likely to be mobile, while those who attend post-92 institutions in large cities are more likely to be geographically static.[35]

If mobility can be an influence on social attitudes, as Goodhart suggests, then it is likely that universities with a mix of mobile and live-at-home students will have a split in the cultural and aspirational attitudes of their students. As we have noted, students who choose to live in the parental home during university are more likely to work part-time, have family or caring responsibilities, be the first generation to attend higher education, be from a lower socio-economic group, have a lower income, be mature and be BAME.[36]

Students with more flexible 'anywhere' identities may be more likely to associate closely with their university in their years of study, and may feel less inhibited when it comes to considering their post-study prospects, given their willingness to move. Students with more stable 'somewhere' identities, particularly those who live in the parental home, may continue their own associations outside the university environment, through their families, communities, religious groups or elsewhere.

Picking apart these ambiguous cultural differences within a diverse student body presents challenges for universities in how they communicate with their students and for their assumptions about students' wishes and needs. Universities may often make the assumption – as does Goodhart – that they are hubs for 'anywhere' identities with a confident socially-liberal outlook.

However, those universities with large numbers of students who continue to live at home may have a more heterogeneous and complex set of values to understand within their student bodies. In this sense, commuter students might provide a link between universities and their local communities and a basis for positive civic engagement. At a time when universities have been criticised for their commitment to their local regions, commuter students should be seen as a way of further developing links between higher education and wider society. However, universities with a significant proportion of commuter students may find it difficult to develop their own sense of community, with social and cultural engagement – the sort of characteristics that underpin current high student satisfaction scores.

4. Case studies

4.1 Liz Barnes, Vice-Chancellor, Staffordshire University

Staffordshire University has 56 per cent of full-time undergraduate students with the same home address as their term-time address. Our HESA data classifies 36 per cent of our students from the local area, not all of whom live at home. Therefore, we have a significant number of students who have long distances to travel. We are in the top 20 for short, medium and long-distance commuters; some of our students are commuting more than 152 miles. As 36 per cent of our students are mature, with family commitments and caring responsibilities, the data are not surprising.

In addition to the challenges presented by commuter students, where evidence has shown that they are likely to have poorer outcomes and are less satisfied with their experience, 40 per cent of our students come from areas classified as among the most deprived in the country and many fit several indicators of disadvantage. It is not surprising therefore that retention remains one of our greatest challenges.

In order to try and better understand our students, their drivers and ambitions, we have undertaken an analysis identifying student segments that has helped us consider how we shape their experience both in their formal studies and the wider experience at university. Each discipline has a different mix and it is important this is understood by course teams.

For example, in Nursing and Midwifery, a plurality of our students can be described as 'carers'. They know why they are here and what they want to do when they graduate. They are

focused, like to be organised and care about others / what others think of them. The second largest category are 'jugglers', those who are not necessarily where they thought they would be at this stage of life. These students often do not really feel they can get involved in the wider university experience.

However, in Games Design for instance, we have:

- 'enthusiasts', for whom their subject is their passion and who are not as bothered about the social experience of university; and

- 'flow-goers', who tend not to stray from their comfort zone and therefore tend not to get involved in the wider university experience.

We know students who are more engaged with the university, spending more time on the campus and building up a peer-support network, are more likely to succeed and to be more satisfied with their student experience. We are currently implementing a student journey project where we consider the student experience from first contact to becoming alumni, with a particular focus on students that live at home.

Not all parts of the plan are yet in place, but they include:

- residential induction opportunities enabling students to build their networks and get to know more about the campus and activities;

- a quiet induction for those that need more support in settling in and making connections;

- a more diverse sports offer, spread across the week at different times of day and facilitating more casual participation;

- reorganising the timetable to reduce the number of days spent on campus, while trying to maximise engagement when they are present; and

- supporting car-share and negotiating reduced travel costs.

We now have a thriving parents, carers and mature students network. Using the National Union of Students's *Ten Steps Towards a Child-Friendly Campus* we have begun to make our campus more family / child friendly, enabling them to spend time on campus.[37] We have webpages and resources designed specifically for this group.

This is all just the start. **As we continue to develop and refurbish our campus, one of our key principles is the 'sticky campus': developing spaces that will enable and encourage students to spend more time on campus.** Understanding our students' lifestyles, ambitions, and challenges is key to providing the right kind of university experience, student support and courses that will enable all to achieve their potential.

4.2 Iain Martin, out-going Vice-Chancellor, Anglia Ruskin University

In response to the needs of our students and the sector-wide concern about the challenges faced by commuting students, Anglia Ruskin University is putting in place a number of measures to respond to and address these challenges. A

substantial part of these changes require us to rethink how we structure and deliver our curriculum. The focus is on ensuring that the time our students spend on campus is really worthwhile, and is structured to support engagement.

Our students have told us they have to deal with expensive commuting costs, such as high parking charges, in addition to managing the complex demands of combining study with part-time employment and childcare to fund their courses. Like commuting students elsewhere, our students end up 'having to make value judgements about the efficacy of attending taught sessions'.[38]

Acknowledging these issues as a systematic set of challenges faced by commuting students, we have agreed to implement changes to the timetabling of our curricular and co-curricular activities. In addition to a range of micro-initiatives developed in partnership with students, we are taking a three-pronged approach, linked to a larger project on active learning:

1. providing our students with predictable timetables for the duration of their degrees, so that they are in a better position to plan their lives;

2. scheduling educational activities to minimise the need for students to travel to campus for single educational events; and

3. supporting student learning both on and off campus through structured active learning opportunities.

To do this, we are reorganising our academic activities, embedding active learning across the institution to make

the most of face-to-face engagement when our students are present on campus. In March 2017, the SCALING UP Active Collaborative Learning for Student Success project we are part of was awarded £1 million to roll out innovative new teaching methods to benefit students.

This work is coupled with investment in more structured independent learning opportunities, supporting students in their studies when they are not on campus, through our online virtual learning environment accompanied by the provision of a media server and lecture-recording software to enable staff to enrich their online and in-class teaching.

All of these initiatives address specific challenges identified by commuting students while at the same time providing real benefit for the whole student community.

4.3 Miriam Amies, Engagement Coordinator, University of Manchester Students' Union

Since 2014 the University of Manchester Students' Union has been running the Off-Campus Students Project. The project was started after a piece of research highlighted how low retention rates and poor student experiences were common themes among off-campus students. Consequently, we set up the project to focus on living-at-home students (or commuter students), which has come to include mature students, student parents and student carers.

In order to provide better support for these students and enhance their student experience, a permanent full-time position was funded by the University of Manchester to sit in the Students' Union. This role has proved vital in having a dedicated

point of contact for live-at-home students. Since 2014, the Students' Union has introduced numerous interventions to improve university life for live-at-home students including: representative roles for students; support guides; a living-at-home students' society; improved common room spaces; and regular tailored events.

The most successful of these events has been the Living at Home Students Residential, which has supported over 250 students in making friends the week before they begin their studies. The residential gives students the opportunity to build their confidence and form friendships while taking part in a variety of informative and fun workshops. These friendships impact hugely on students' sense of belonging which has been proven to correspond significantly to students' wellbeing and academic outcomes.

> 'It made me feel a lot more confident about meeting people at university and participating in student life.' – First year Engineering Student, 2018

> 'I'm really glad this event was held. Before it, I was really nervous about starting university, but I went home not being able to wait till it started.' – First year Law Student, 2018

> 94 per cent of students who attended felt more part of the student community after the Residential – 2018

4.4 Paresh Shah, Research Manager, London Higher

During 2016/17, nearly 93,000 full-time first degree UK students were domiciled in London and remained in the capital for their

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undergraduate studies, making up 47 per cent of this student group.

London Higher is leading a pilot project studying the experiences of commuter students in London, begun in early 2018. The aim is to understand the experience of commuting to study in higher education in London, and in particular the impact on students' potential for progression and success.

The project is collecting both quantitative and qualitative information on students travelling to campus, whether living at home or in other accommodation (such as more distant halls of residence), with a focus on full-time first degree undergraduate students, but also considering full-time postgraduate taught students.

At each of the participating institutions, travel times by public transport have been computed in a standardised dataset, based upon HESA data, using term-time accommodation and campus postcodes, before being analysed using logistic regression with progression and continuation as the dependent binary variables. Factors tested for significance include travel time, gender, ethnicity, subject of study and entry qualifications.

Preliminary results from five institutions indicate similar outcomes, with the significant predictors for progression including subject area for study, entry tariff or qualifications, and travel time. **The initial findings indicate that students who have longer commuting times have significantly lower progression rates, with other factors being constant.** For one institution, analyses using the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), found students from the most deprived areas have

longer travel times and significantly lower progression rates compared with students from the least deprived areas. The outputs are being collated for an initial report in late 2018.

The project is also conducting focus groups with commuter students to better understand: students' reasons and experiences in commuting; academic and social engagement; and personal commitments, including part-time work. It will also cover suggestions for enhancing the student experience, such as changes to campus facilities.

4.5 Giles Carden, Chief of Staff and Director of Strategic Projects, Lancaster University

Lancaster University has embodied the principles of the 'sticky campus' and aims to foster a sense of community for all students. Commuter students make up a very small proportion of Lancaster students, and it is therefore important for us to prevent this group feeling a sense of isolation.

The Lancaster collegiate system is particularly important in this regard. Students (and staff) are all assigned to a college regardless of whether or not they are residential, in order to foster friendships and provide a sense of community.

We now run events in Welcome Week for all commuter students with talks about the facilities and services available specifically for them, this includes learning support and making use of travelling time, wellbeing issues, and providing a specific opportunity to meet other commuting students.

Our space planning has ensured there are a variety of spaces on campus for students to work and relax in, from quiet study

spaces, through relaxed study spaces allowing conversations, to common rooms for playing pool, darts and table football. **Each college offers commuter students access to a kitchen where they can make a hot drink or use a microwave oven and space to enable them to congregate to eat and socialise.** Colleges also offer quiet study rooms for these students. Bookable group study rooms are also available on a 24/7 basis.

We have also recognised the importance of developing a sense of belonging as early as possible to students' academic departments. Departments put on a series of activities in Welcome Week for students to do in pairs or groups in order to help them get to know one another and the department's staff.

In 2017, we commissioned a survey of commuting students to establish how we could improve their experience. We are now ensuring that two of our nine colleges put on some events specifically targeted at commuters throughout the year.

Collectively these strategies have proved important in ensuring commuter students feel a sense of community and are engaged and satisfied with their student experience.

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5. Recommendations

Commuter students are a much misunderstood and underappreciated group of students. At the national level, their numbers are significant and, at some universities, they may be in the majority. Commuter students are clearly different from residential or 'boarder' students in terms of their higher education needs and experiences.

Large numbers of commuter students have an impact on wider university life and may well account for a significant proportion of the variation in standard university assessment scores, such as the *National Student Survey*. Indeed, the Government's review of the 2017 Teaching Excellence Framework found that:

> *having a high percentage of students who are local students increases a provider's probability of getting a bronze award and decreases their probability of getting a gold award regardless of which region the provider is located.*[39]

5.1 National policy recommendations

1. We need a better way to define and compare data on commuter students, including consistency of data categorisation in HESA returns. HESA should ensure that universities' annual return of data related to term-time accommodation is consistent and comparable.

2. The Government should ensure the funding system adequately recognises and supports commuter students, particularly in the context of the ongoing Review of Post-18 Education and Funding. Policymakers should be aware of the considerable proportion of higher education students

that do not move away from home to study, and ensure that applicant concerns regarding cost of living are not restricting applicants' choices of higher education.

3. Given that a significant proportion of part-time students fit the definition of commuters, policymakers concerned with part-time and mature students should consider the impact of student commuting on decisions to enter higher education as well as maintenance support.

4. The Teaching Excellence Framework and other assessments of universities' teaching quality and impact on social mobility should incorporate consideration of the proportion of a university's students who are commuters.

5. If higher education participation is to continue to increase, national policymakers need to consider the extent to which the state is prepared or able to support the majority of students moving away from home and ensure such opportunities do not become dominated by the most privileged.

5.2 Recommendations for universities and students' unions

The approach of institutions to understanding and serving their commuter students better depends considerably on the size and proportion of this population within wider student bodies. A university such as Wolverhampton or London South Bank, with very high numbers of commuter students, will need to take a different approach to universities such as Durham, Exeter or St Andrews, with very small such populations.

1. Given the challenges identified in this paper in precisely defining and identifying commuter students, universities should agree upon a common definition of commuter students based around living arrangements and the distance from their place of residence to their place of study.

2. Universities should use their own internal student engagement and representation arrangements to deepen understanding of the experiences of their commuter students, particularly in relation to accommodation, travel and involvement with wider student life. This information should be widely shared within universities, particularly with academic departments and student support staff.

3. Universities with large numbers of student commuters should provide information and advice for students regarding travel options and be aware of occasions where disruption to transport might disrupt students' learning and attendance. Universities and students' unions should also work to influence local transport policymakers to improve provision for their students where possible.

4. Universities should, as much as logistically possible, seek to make student timetables coherent and convenient for commuter students. This might be accomplished in a number of ways, from limiting the days per week with on-campus taught sessions, to avoiding class commitments requiring peak-time travel. Universities and academic departments should consult their students and students' unions on the best means to ensure that timetables cater for students' travel requirements as best possible.

5. Campus spaces should incorporate facilities for students who travel long distances, including quiet study spaces, lockers, common rooms and communal kitchen facilities.

6. Social events and co-curricular opportunities should be accessible to commuter students and create student communities outside the traditional student residence. For example, students living outside university halls might be linked to a hall as a means to facilitate social engagement.[40] Universities and students' unions might also consider forming commuter student societies or social groups to ensure a sense of a community for those students who do not live in halls or other shared student accommodation.

7. Students who come from the local area should be valued as part of a university's local and civic roots – as a tie to a local area and a way of anchoring an institution's position in its regional environment. This could be a seen as a return to the founding missions of many redbrick and post-92 universities.

8. Higher education institutions with very low numbers of students coming from the local area or living in the parental home should perhaps look to expand their numbers. The higher education sector has sometimes been criticised for lacking a connection to its localities. Expanding the numbers of students who study locally may help reconnect universities with some areas commonly referred to as left behind, while also helping them build connections to the communities in which they reside.

If higher education in the UK is to become fairer, more open and more socially accessible while also remaining affordable to all students (and taxpayers), it is unavoidable that the number of students living from home and commuting significant distances to study will increase.

Not every student will wish to move away from home to study, nor will every student wish to stay. However, the goal of effective policymaking should be to ensure that no student is prevented by financial, social, or logistical barriers from meeting their ultimate aspirations. Furthermore, whichever route a student takes, both in terms of residency and travel, all should have the opportunity to partake fully in the rich experiences that the UK's diverse higher education sector has to offer.

Notes on HESA data

Neither the Higher Education Statistics Agency Limited nor HESA Services Limited can accept responsibility for any inferences or conclusions derived by third parties from data or other information obtained from Heidi Plus.

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The vast majority of students in the UK experience higher education on a residential basis: they move away from home to study. But, for a significant minority of students, higher education is experienced differently. Around one-quarter of students live at home and commute to study, and in some parts of the country and at some institutions the proportion is much higher. There is evidence to suggest that commuter students have poorer outcomes and are less engaged and satisfied with their academic experience.

In this report, David Maguire and David Morris consider the various definitions of 'commuter students', explore some of the challenges they face and outline practical solutions that might be employed to improve the experience of commuter students. A number of case studies are included, which show different ways to help those who move away to study.