

## ***How do UK universities engage with commuter students?***

### Research summary

For many students in the UK, moving away from home to go to university is a traditional rite of passage (Smith, 2018). However, within the massified and marketised environment of higher education (Lynch, 2006), characterised by high tuition fees and lack of maintenance grants, the number of students who live at home whilst studying for their degree i.e. commuter students (Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2016) is increasing year-on-year. For some UK universities, commuter students may comprise over half of their student body (for example the Universities of Kent, Derby, Kingston, Solent, Staffordshire, Birmingham City, Cumbria); many others are not aware of the extent of their commuter student population (Maguire and Morris, 2018).

Whilst living at home and studying for a degree may be a financially rational decision (Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2016; Woodley, 2017, Lightfoot, 2018) that allows the maintenance of family and community support networks (Maguire and Morris, 2018), there is a general recognition that commuter students may also experience social and emotional disadvantages (Christie, 2007; Meuleman et al, 2015; Maguire and Morris, 2018; Meehan and Howells, 2018). It is widely held that commuter students obtain poorer learning outcomes, secure fewer graduate roles, and are less engaged with their academic experiences than their peers living in halls (Holton and Finn, 2018; Meuleman et al, 2015; Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2016, Lightfoot, 2018). Research suggests they do not have the same student experience as they have a different way of attending and different learning needs to those within the traditional home-university model of transition for whom the university system is established (Thomas and Jones, 2017). Maguire and Morris (2018) suggest this is driven by a combination of influences, including the unpredictability and costs of travelling to campus, part-time work and/or family responsibilities.

This research paper reports the outcomes of a content analysis of 149 UK study on campus universities' public websites which seeks to understand how UK universities recognise and engage with commuter students. It also aims to identify whether universities recognise the challenges commuter face and how they attempt to address them. This may provide potential good practice to encourage UK universities to recognise and promote a bespoke commuter student university experience.

The research findings suggest that although only 15% of UK study on campus universities publicly report university-wide strategies to support commuter students, 49% of university websites suggest their institutions recognise commuter students as a specific group with different needs. Of these institutions, 68% (34% of all UK universities in this study) appear to be implementing interventions in an attempt to develop a bespoke commuter student university experience to engage them more effectively, develop a sense of belonging and ensure academic and personal benefits of university engagement are more fully realised. These interventions range from advice on how to commute to campus (e.g. Northampton, Manchester, Nottingham Trent) to virtual interventions such as commuter student Facebook groups (e.g. Keele, Sheffield Hallam, Swansea, Dundee) and practical on-campus interventions such as commuter lounges (e.g. Winchester, St Andrews, St Mary's University of London).

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