

Commuter students in higher education institutions in Ireland. A student-centred, whole provider approach to improve student experiences and outcomes

Teaching Tips: How to be more ‘commuter compassionate’ in your teaching and student support practices



No flexibility to support students who are commuting ... seen as an outcast compared to students who live on campus or near campus. (THFG1:2)

Staff may view commuter students as less engaged in lectures if they skip them (due to travel time/cost/only 1 or 2 lectures that day) or do not sign up for clubs & societies. (THFG1: 12)



...still plenty of lecturers who don’t understand the fact that we need to leave early to catch our bus and it often upsets them. They either ask us to just not show up to class as it will distract others or stay and miss the bus. (THFG2: 4)

Introduction

In 2024/25 research was undertaken in higher education institutions in Ireland to explore commuter students’ experiences and to consider changes that would improve their experiences and outcomes. It addressed the questions:

- How does being a commuter student impact on student experiences and outcomes in higher education institutions in Ireland?
- How can higher education institutions improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students?

The study combined a semi-structured review and thematic analysis of the websites of the seven higher education institutions (HEIs) in Ireland, with two online ‘town hall focus groups’ (THFGs) involving 33 participants: six staff and 27 students, eight of whom were trained as facilitators and ‘jurors’ to reflect on the evidence heard. The THFGs addressed the key research questions, collecting individual responses via an online form; small groups discussed the topics and then a commuter student facilitator reported key points from their discussion into the main room.

Commuter students generally found the experience of commuting to be quite negative, with few advantages. Furthermore, they felt their on-campus experience is not designed to facilitate their engagement. Students find that the organisation and delivery of the academic experience does not accommodate their needs, and they have few opportunities to engage with the wider student experience.

While there are some fundamental organisational and cultural changes that HEIs could and should make to facilitate commuter student engagement and success this briefing focuses on the changes academic staff can make to be more ‘commuter compassionate’ in their teaching and student support practices.

Teaching and support tips

- Commuter inclusive language:** When welcoming new students to your teaching session, programme or department use commuter inclusive language: remember that not all students moved into new accommodation, are living on their own for the first time or are new to the city or region. But they will all be new to your session, programme, department and HEI.
- Talk about commuting:** Talk to your teaching groups and to individual students about commuting. A quick show of hands: who is living on campus, who is living locally, who is commuting from home? Or a question about practical arrangements in a tutoring or advising session can be useful. When asking questions about practical issues and wellbeing, don’t just refer to living away from home, moving into new accommodation and making new friends, consider also travel, parking and balancing study requirements with commuting and other commitments.
- Commuter student community:** Encourage students who are commuting to find out where they are each commuting from and to think about sharing lifts or travelling together, meeting up before teaching sessions (they often arrive early to secure parking etc) or meeting up in their local areas.
- Commuters can enrich the cohort experience:** Recognise the benefits that commuters have and bring to the student cohort, for example time management and organisational skills; knowledge of the area e.g. best places to socialise or special offers and places to visit; and links to the community and region for other opportunities such as volunteering, employment, placements or undertaking dissertation research.
- Know what support is available and tell commuters about it:** Find out what your HEI has to offer and signpost commuter students to the support that’s available. Look for tailored information and support for commuter students, but also travelling and parking information, eating on campus, spaces for relaxation and to store belongings, access to a fridge, a kettle or microwave, and places where phones and other devices can be plugged in and charged up. Information about the VLE, online communication platforms and daytime activities may also be useful.
- Be compassionate if commuters are late or need to leave early:** Give consideration to that fact that if students arrive late this may not be due to disorganisation, but to unavoidable travel delays. Preventing them from entering a teaching session, or even locking them out, or just drawing attention to late arrivals and potentially humiliating them, can be upsetting for students. Similarly, consider whether finishing on time or even early at the end of the day would be feasible, as it could make a big difference to commuters.
- Support engagement beyond the classroom through the VLE:** Use the VLE to support commuter students by ensuring that the slides are up in advance and that the recordings are available to be viewed after the teaching session. You might also include a summary of a seminar discussion or a link to an online lab tutorial for students who were not able to attend in-person. Use the VLE tools to facilitate engagement before, during and after teaching.
- Enable inclusive group work:** Encourage and help student group work to be inclusive, for example, meeting when everyone is on campus, or using an online platform for online or hybrid meetings, and allocating work that plays to each other’s strengths and access to resources. Commuters may want to undertake group work and independent study together using an online platform.
- Schedule assessments and exams to accommodate commuters:** Think about the timing of assessments and exams that you can control, for example an early start or late finish may unintentionally disadvantage commuter students.
- Be compassionate and flexible when you can:** Provide flexibility in the scheduling of personal tutor sessions and other one-to-one meetings, for example, offering days and times adjacent to taught sessions, or offering an online option.
- Embed co-curricular and social activities into your teaching:** Try to build additional activities into teaching time, rather than outside of the timetable. Alternatively, organise co-curricular and social activities during the day when commuters are on campus, or provide the opportunity to participate remotely.
- Communicate changes and cancellations compassionately:** Think about how you communicate with all students, but especially commuters about changes or the cancellation of teaching sessions etc. Commuters often need the information earlier than students based on or near campus and they may not have access to their HEI email whilst travelling. You could state at the start of the year that if a class is to be cancelled or changed the information will be available via a particular communication channel by a specific time to help commuters plan ahead and not make a wasted journey.

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Please get in touch for further information, briefings and the final research report, or to tell me what changes you have made, either individually or institutionally.

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PARTNER INSTITUTIONS



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