

## Commuter students:

A student-centred, whole provider approach to improve student experiences and outcomes in technological higher education in Ireland

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# Briefing for Technological Higher Education Providers

11<sup>th</sup> September 2024

# Overview

Commuter students

Engagement and success

Approaches to improving commuter student success

About the project

Questions and discussion

# Defining commuter students

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- ❖ Commuter students remain in the family home while studying in higher education (HE), rather than relocating and becoming residential students in or around their place of study.
- ❖ In the UK commuter students have been defined and identified by postcode, distance, time and type of accommodation.
- ❖ Union of Students in Ireland definition: *"A commuter student is a student who lives off-campus and travels to their college or university for classes and other academic activities. Unlike residential students who live in on-campus housing or in privately rented accommodation within the city/town, commuter students typically live at home or in out-of-city/town accommodation. They commute to campus by car, public transportation, or other means. This type of student often requires balancing travel time with academic responsibilities and may impact their level of participation in on-campus activities and in engaging in the student experience."*
- ❖ Different terms have been developed including live-at-home or local students (Fulford 2021). Webb and Turner (2020) define three types of students: living locally in existing accommodation, commuting from afar, or having relocated to study. In London many students who relocate have long commutes.
- ❖ Some studies also differentiate by other characteristics, such as age, socio-economic status, ethnicity and disability.

# Commuter students in Ireland

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- ❖ In Ireland around 40% of students remain at home and commute to college (Cullinan 2023).
- ❖ Students who are full-time, male, younger, have a disability or impairment, study at institutes of technology or technological universities, and are based in Dublin are more likely to live with their parents and commute (Erskine & Harmon, 2023).
- ❖ Gormley (2016\*) found that students who live at home with their parents are not from lower socio-economic groups; however he also found student halls of residence are mostly used by students from higher socio-economic groups.
- ❖ Commuters in Ireland – including students – have long commute times. The average student commute time is 52 minutes one way (Cullinan 2023).
- ❖ The poorest students have the longest commutes; on average 18 minutes longer for the least well-off students compared to the most well-off (Cullinan 2023).

\* This is based on Eurostudent surveys from 2006, 2009 and 2013.

# Commuter students' outcomes

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- ❖ Typically commuting is correlated with poorer student outcomes, especially for longer commutes.
- ❖ Commuter students have lower rates of continuation (Woodfield 2014, Fulford (2021). 'Travel time' was found to predict student continuation (London Higher 2019).
- ❖ Commuting students have lower levels of attainment (e.g. Woodfield, 2014, Neves & Hillman, 2018, Webb & Turner, 2020, Butt & Hiley-Rayner, nd).
- ❖ Commuter students are less likely to be employed in a graduate job than students who relocated to study (The Institute for Employment Research, Artess et al., 2014; see also Maguire and Morris, 2018).
- ❖ Living at home impacts negatively on student wellbeing, especially for female students who have longer commutes (Cullinan & Flannery, 2023). T

# Student engagement and success

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- ❖ Student engagement is recognised internationally as contributing to continuation and completion (Tight, 2020; Zepke, 2021).
- ❖ Student engagement is poorly defined (Trowler, 2010).
- ❖ Engagement is broadly understood to include active involvement in learning, interaction with staff and participation in additional co-curricular and extra-curricular activities (Coates, 2007).
- ❖ Engagement results in a richer learning experience, greater connectedness with peers and facilitates access to support; this contributes to a sense of belonging and success (Thomas, 2012, Tight, 2020).
- ❖ Qualitative research in England (Thomas and Jones 2017) found that commuter students prioritised academic engagement over wider engagement in enhancement and social activities. Commuter student tend to focus on achieving a good degree and getting a graduate job.

# Institutional responses

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- ❖ Two broad types of responses: changing students or changing institutions.
- ❖ Changing students includes raising awareness of the benefits of (wider) engagement and creating a more 'sticky campus' to entice students to stay longer.
- ❖ Raising awareness amongst students of the costs and stress of commuting and provide information about commuting.
- ❖ Helping commuters meet other students, either on campus or where they live.
- ❖ Provision of places to meet, store belongings or prepare food and relax.
- ❖ Better parking, bus services, security etc to facilitate commuting.
- ❖ Financial support for travel or to support staying on campus.

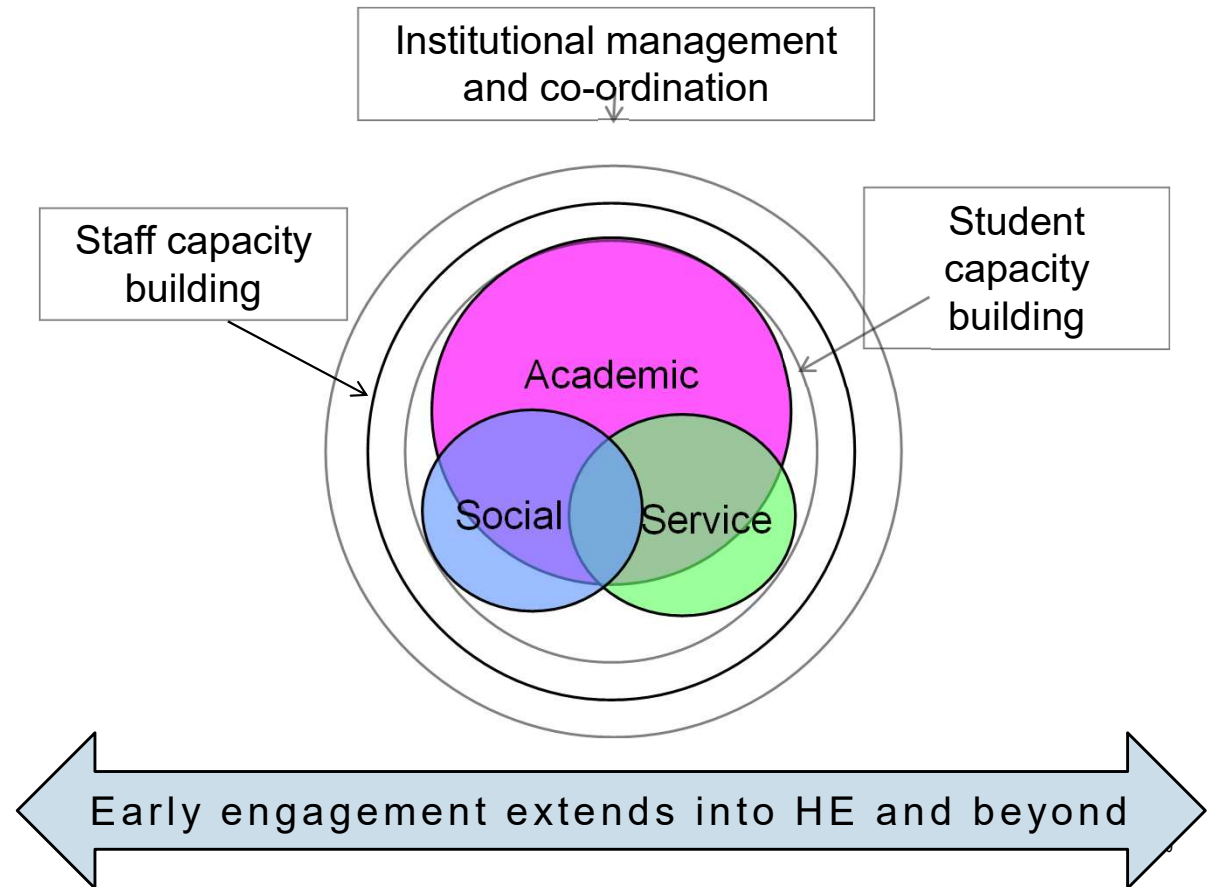


# Institutional responses

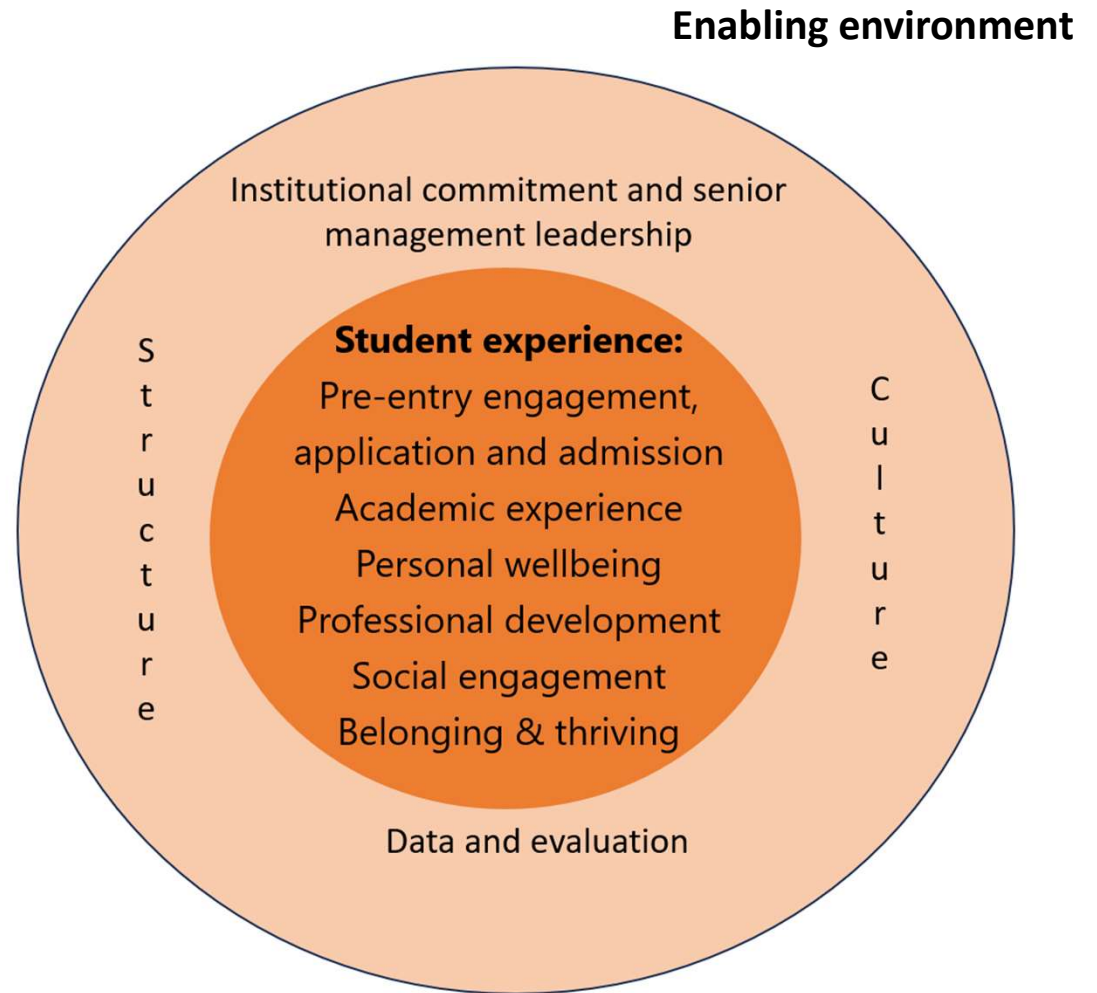
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- ❖ Changing institutions involves cultural and structural change.
- ❖ Cultural changes focus on changing attitudes and assumptions about commuter student. This may include recognising the skills and accomplishments of commuter students and acknowledging engagement beyond the HE institution (Thomas 2019); raising awareness of the realities of commuter students' lives (e.g. if they are delayed, or when allocating placements), normalising or celebrating commuter students and not framing non-residential students as second best (staff attitudes, websites etc).
- ❖ Structural and organisational changes relate to the organisation and delivery of learning and the wider experience: E.g. 'freedom to learn from home' (Miah 2018), opportunities for blended learning and a range of study modes (Brunel 2021-203), making face-to-face sessions more worthwhile (Smith 2018), timetable improvements, lecture capture, day-time extra-curricular and social activities, online meetings and appointments. The Block Model is an example of institutional transformation which improves student satisfaction, continuation and attainment, and closes equity gaps (Kift 2024, Samarawickrema and Cleary 2021).

# What works? Student retention and success (2012, 2017)



# Whole Provider Approach model (2024)



# Whole provider approach (WPA)

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# Inclusive student experience

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- ❖ A whole provider student experience indicates that interventions (practices, services and opportunities) are available to students across the HEP, rather than just in particular sites, departments or courses.
- ❖ A whole provider student experience should be based on institutional change rather than requiring students to adapt and fit in (Kift 2015 & 2023, Thomas 2002, Thomas & Tight 2011, Zepke & Leach 2005).
- ❖ The most effective way of reaching students – particularly those targeted by widening access and student success interventions - is through the curriculum (Kift 2024, Thomas 2012) rather than through supplementary activities, as participating in learning is often prioritised above the wider student experience (Thomas 2020).
- ❖ Sometimes a targeted and proactive approach is required to meet the needs of specific groups (Moore et al 2013).
- ❖ All staff, not just professional widening access and student success staff, and all students, should contribute to a WPA.

# Enabling environment

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Four dimensions:

1. Institutional and senior leadership commitment.
2. Alignment of HEP policies, processes and organisational arrangements.
3. Staff and student engagement and partnership in widening access and student success/WPA: Engagement, capacity and communication.
4. Data and evidence.



# Overview of the project

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- ❖ Builds on previous work of Liz Thomas (commuter students and WPA) and N-TUTORR (students as partners: innovation & change fellowship).
  - ❖ The project aims to apply the WPA model to improve commuter student experiences and outcomes in Irish technological higher education and explore how higher education providers could change their structures and cultures to enhance commuter student engagement.
  - ❖ It involves background survey to understand definitions, numbers and current approaches to supporting commuter students in each HEP.
  - ❖ Three town hall focus groups (THFGs) and commuter student juries to explore commuter student experiences, enabling factors and changes that could be made, priorities for change for HEPs and the sector.
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# Recruiting participants

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We would like each HEI to recruit:

- ❖ 15-18 commuter students.
- ❖ 12-15 staff in a range of roles.
- ❖ 7 commuter student jurors.

How to recruit participants:

- ❖ Include in induction information at the start of the year.
- ❖ Information on the screen at the start of lectures.
- ❖ Announcement on the VLE.
- ❖ Emails to students.
- ❖ Work with student union and any relevant societies.
- ❖ Utilise existing relationships.
- ❖ Identify roles and staff that relate to commuter student experience.




# Benefits of participating

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- ❖ Reflect on and share your experiences of being/working with commuter students.
- ❖ Learn more about the experiences of commuter students from your own institution and other institutions in Ireland.
- ❖ Time to reflect on student experiences and the role of the university/college in supporting commuter student engagement and success.
- ❖ Have your voice heard.
- ❖ Influence institutional and national policy and practice in relation to commuter student experience, outcomes and equity.
- ❖ Be part of national research project that is intended to inform the direction of higher education in Ireland.
- ❖ Meet colleagues and peers from other higher education institutions in Ireland.
- ❖ Students receive a voucher / payment and get costs covered.
- ❖ Access to further information and training about commuter students' engagement and success.

# Training and preparation


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- ❖ Online briefing for HEPs.
  - ❖ Briefing document to provide more information.
  - ❖ Mandatory online training for student commuter jurors.
  - ❖ Preparatory materials and guidance available for staff and student participants.
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# THFG topics (A)

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Experience of being a commuter student: How does being a commuter student impact on student experiences and outcomes in technological higher education in Ireland?

- i. In what ways does being a commuter student impact on academic, professional and social engagement (positively and negatively)?
  - ii. How does the way higher education is organised impact negatively on commuter students' engagement and success?
  - iii. How do staff view/treat commuter students (in comparison to other students)?
  - iv. What institutional or sector level policies, processes and practices hinder commuter students to engage, belong and succeed?
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# THFG topics (B)

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Improving the experience and outcomes of commuter students: How can technological higher education improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students?

- i. In an ideal world, how could the organisation, pedagogy and assessment of learning be improved to help students to engage? This might include timetabling, on-line learning, group working, more flexible deadlines, longer or shorter courses, etc.
- ii. How could staff understand, value and support commuter students to engage and succeed in their learning experience?
- iii. How could commuter students be helped to maximise the benefits available from wider higher education opportunities (e.g. leadership, volunteering, engagement with peers, accessing support services) by making them available in different ways?
- iv. How could the expectations and organisation of higher education in Ireland be re-imagined to help commuter students to get the most out the learning experience and wider opportunities in higher education?

# Timeline

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- ❖ 11<sup>th</sup> September 2024: Briefing for the sector
- ❖ 16<sup>th</sup> September 2024: Survey sent to all technological HEPs
- ❖ Recruitment of commuter student jury members by 11<sup>th</sup> October 2024
- ❖ Training commuter student jury 1/10/24 – 18/10/24
- ❖ Recruitment of THFG participants by 18/10/24
- ❖ Briefing for participants from 1/10/24
- ❖ 21-25 October 2024 THFGs
- ❖ November and December 2024: Transcription and analysis
- ❖ January and February 2025: Evidence-informed policy and practice briefings
- ❖ February 2025: Sector meetings to identify policy levers
- ❖ March – May 2025: Contribute to sector and institutional events
- ❖ April 2025: Survey THE sector
- ❖ May 2025: Final project report
- ❖ 30<sup>th</sup> May 2025: Project end

## Questions and discussion

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