The importance of belonging amongst commuter students

Qualitative Research Study





Introduction

Belonging is increasingly recognised as a critical determinant of student wellbeing, engagement, and retention, yet commuter students remain one of the least understood and least supported groups within this landscape. In response, Campus to Campus, in partnership with Royal Holloway University London and Brunel University London, has led a qualitative study exploring how commuting shapes students' sense of connection, safety, and participation in university life. Drawing on the lived experiences of students across four institutions, this paper examines the structural, cultural, and relational factors that influence belonging for commuter cohorts - and highlights the urgent need for more inclusive, ecosystem-wide approaches to supporting their success.

Rationale & Challenges

50%

Growing population of Commuter Students

The UK commuter student population has risen from 25% in 2013 to approximately 50% today (Wojtas, 2014; Kenyon, 2025) demonstrating a marked shift in students exploring a new way to live, and engage with university life.

46%

Loss of Student Population to lack of Belonging

Approximately 46% of students consider leaving their course, often due to a lack of belonging, which is a key predictor of persistence (Strayhorn, 2012, 2019).



Logistics

Long, costly travel times and financial pressures limit integration into campus life (Sanders, 2001)

Social Isolation

Commuters are less likely to participate in campus-based activities (Stuart et al., 2011) and often feel "separated" from university societies.

Support Evolution

Existing university support services remain largely focused on residential models rather than the home and community lives of commuters (Pokorny et al., 2016).

Foreword

Dr. Susan Kenyon Principal Lecturer, Canterbury Christ Church University

“For most of my career, I have focused on the links between transport and social exclusion. Put simply, if you can’t get to places, you can’t do things; and the things you can’t do are important.

Many people wonder how this is relevant to university students.

When we think about students, we tend to have a picture in our mind of a young, 18–21-year-old. They live on campus, often in a spacious room inside a building that looks like a Jacobean Mansion, overlooking a quad or, even better, a river to punt on.

These students are untroubled by transport issues. In the peculiarly British tradition of higher education, they relocated to attend university. Every aspect of their life is on campus, or within the defined area of the student quarter, as they immerse themselves, culturally and socially, in the life of the Academy.
So, they don’t need to travel – to misquote Dolly Parton, they just tumble out of bed and stumble to their lectures, social life and support services.

That isn’t the reality for the majority of UK university students today. Most are commuters. Whilst the proportions vary by institution from 12-85%, every university in the UK is affected by the rise of the commuter student. But our institutions haven’t kept up with this change. In the main, universities’ pedagogies, policies and processes, alongside government policy and practice, continue to serve the traditional residential student.

Campus to Campus’ research provides compelling evidence of the impacts of the emotional toll of this peripherality on our students’ wellbeing, their participation and their chances to succeed. Enduring marathon days, physical and social isolation, commuters’ success is against the odds. But the report also provides invaluable insights into practical actions that we can all take, to enhance the commuter experience and support their inclusion.

With this research, Campus to Campus has increased the visibility and profile of the exclusion of commuter students. This is a powerful call-to-action, which the higher education sector and government cannot afford to ignore.”

THEMES

Across the research, five themes emerged that illuminate the complexity of belonging for commuter students.

Early expectations revealed a striking mismatch between what students hoped university life would offer and the realities they encountered - particularly around connection, campus culture, and the practicalities of travel.

Logistical challenges shaped daily rhythms, energy levels, and opportunities for participation, with long or unpredictable journeys often acting as a barrier to engaging or forming meaningful relationships .

Students cited belonging as closely tied to **whether they felt seen**, known, by academic and support staff in ways that worked around their commuting patterns.

The impact on **mental health and wellbeing** was significant. Students spoke about isolation, exhaustion, and the emotional toll of feeling peripheral to university life, even when academically capable and motivated. For some, these pressures contributed to thoughts of **withdrawal** due to the cumulative strain of commuting, disconnection, and limited support eroded their sense of belonging and possibility.

PARTNERSHIP

We would especially like to thank Royal Holloway University London and Brunel University Students Union for their support in encouraging student involvement and engagement with the study.

Helen Groenendaal - Director of Student Life

Royal Holloway University London

“At Royal Holloway we’re committed to listening and responding to the needs of a growing commuter student cohort as best we can. For us, getting the commuter experience and their support right is an investment in student wellbeing and success. Fostering true belonging through the student journey is central to their student experience, and to enriching connection with their peers and our community. We’re confident this incredibly valuable research - with student voice at the heart - will be a springboard to ensure happy and thriving commuter students”.

Ruth Sharma - Head of Student Support and Representation

Union of Brunel Students

“The Union of Brunel Students would like to thank Campus to Campus for the opportunity to be a part of this crucial research project.
We have acknowledged across the University that the population share of commuter students within the Brunel Community is increasing and that their needs can be very different to those living on or nearby the campus. There is some suggestion also that overall satisfaction in the student experience is lower in commuter students compared to residential students.
The Union has made an organisational commitment and agreed it is a strategic priority to better understand and better support our commuter students. Every student should thrive at Brunel, and this research is a pivotal starting point to ensure that this is the case.”



Data Collection & Analysis

Our Definition

A commuter student is a student who does not live on campus, and instead travels to attend lectures, seminars, and social events. Travel times range from 30 minutes to 3 hours (one-way).
Every participant who took part in our research considered themselves a commuter student based on their own definition.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited through university and student union partnerships (internal newsletter, social media). A brief online survey was shared to register interest in participation. Participants had the option to enter into a £50 Amazon voucher draw as an incentive to take part.

Pre-Interview Survey

62 online surveys were completed by students from four institutions across the UK; Royal Holloway University London, Brunel University London, Sheffield Hallam University and University of Hull.

Semi-structured 1-2-1 Interviews

15 interviews were conducted online (face-to-face) between our research team and first year commuter students to capture their unique onboarding experience.

Group Sessions

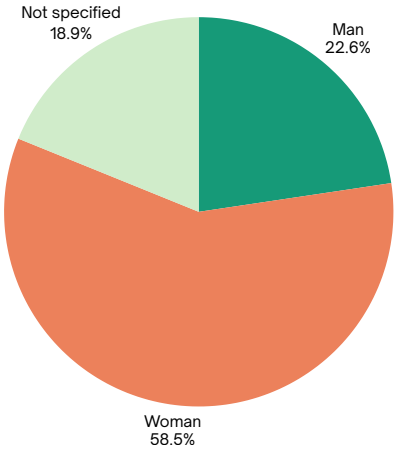
Over 80 students took part in a qualitative ‘story-telling’ style group discussion to uncover personal experiences with commuting and its affects on belonging.

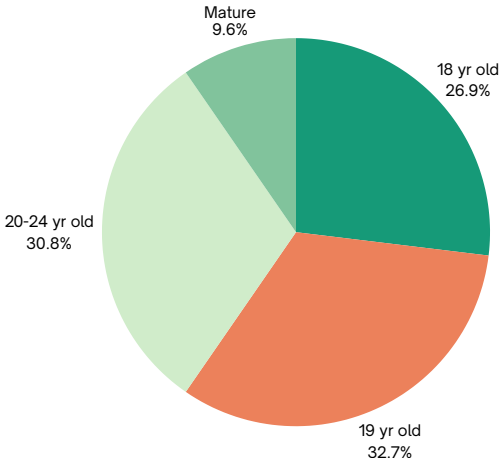
Thematic Analysis

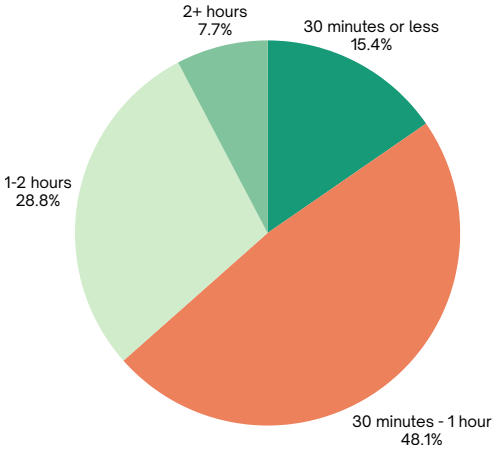
Our research team took a thematic analysis approach. All data approached was with consent, in line with the British Psychological Society guidelines and shared with anonymity.

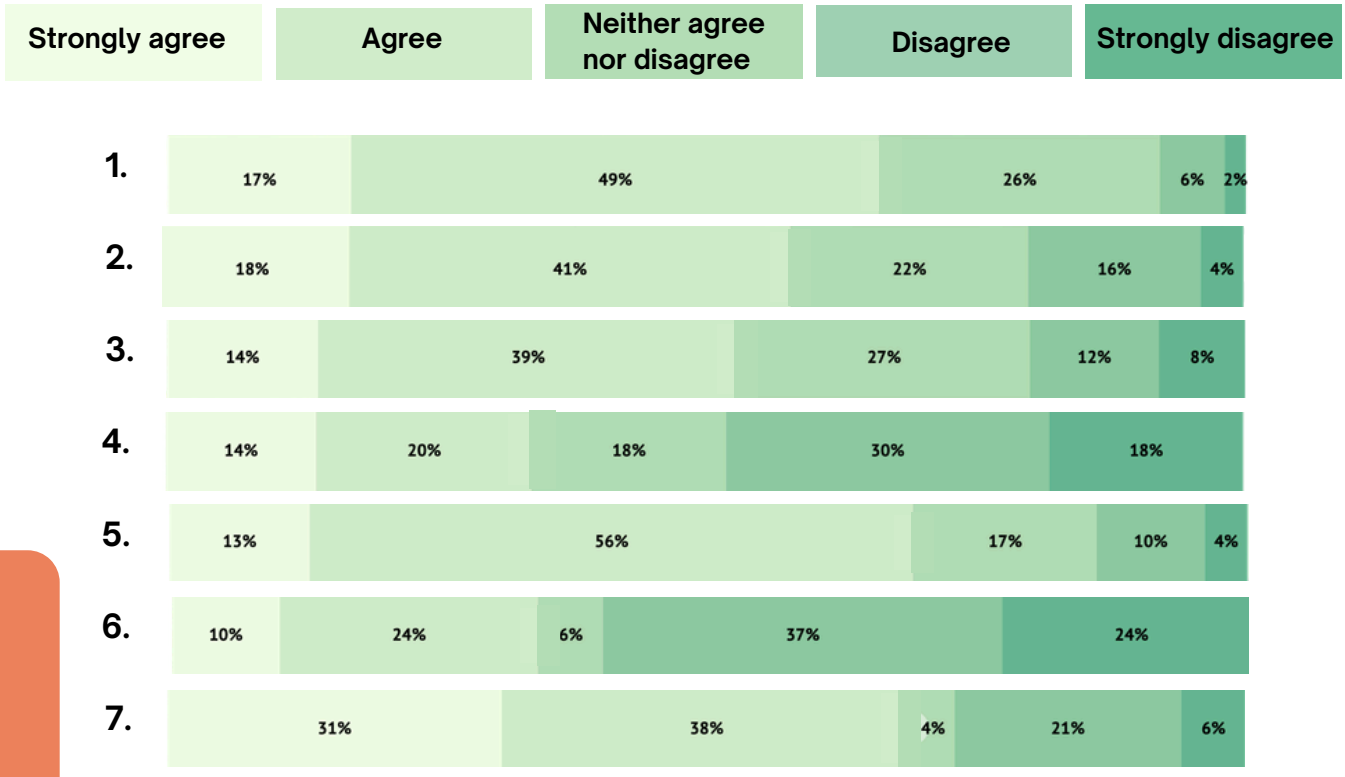
Research Findings

1st year Commuter Students









1. I feel a strong sense of belonging at my university
2. I feel fully connected to the people and communities at my university
3. I have found it easy to make friends
4. I have been able to participate in social activities as much as I would like
5. I feel I have access to the support I need to help me manage university life
6. At some point, I have considered leaving my course/thought it might be difficult to continue
7. Managing university work alongside commuting and home life has been hard for me

Source: Pre-interview survey, 62 responses

Starting university: Early expectations and feelings

Expectation vs Reality

“It's a bit more lonely and friends wise… it’s harder.” - Anya

- Students enter university with high expectations for a vibrant social life, similar to school where people "eat together and go out together"
- But many were met with a "disorienting" environment where students are "very independent" and "mind their own business"

The Empty Timetable

“I’m thinking just be more flexible about timings and put us into their minds about how long it will take to travel..." - Nico

“I’ll have four hours (in between lectures) with nothing to do.” - Erin

- A major surprise for students like Richard was how few hours were actually scheduled.
- For commuters, this led to a "disorienting" sense of drift if they didn't have a plan for the gaps between classes.

Starting university: Early expectations and feelings

Academic Transition

For some, the transition from A-Levels felt "harder" due to a perceived "lack of support" and a lack of specific "specifications" for assignments. Others found the first term "outrageously easy," leading to boredom and disengagement.

“It's been harder than A levels obviously because it's just less support… you have so much information and so much going on… you’re like, do I need to know all this? There's no specific guide or specification as to what you need to know… They give you an assignment, they talk about it for like five minutes and then they just expect you to get on with it.” -Anna

75% of mental health cases emerge during adolescence or early adulthood (Kessler et al., 2005). These are vulnerability intensified by academic stress and social changes (Bantjes et al., 2022)

Student Voice

"It it feels like more than a 9 to 5 job because I have to wake up early in the morning around 6:00 to make it to 9:00 a.m. lecture" - Anthony

"I just didn't have those initial flatmates to start out with, which is why I feel kind of isolated at the start." - Otto

"I can come in some days where you don't speak to anybody apart from someone in the coffee shop and you know it will be quite a lonely experience." - Richard

"it's an hour lecture... do I have to go... is it worth the journey? Like I I don't think I've skipped anything yet, but you're always thinking.. is it worth the journey or not?" - Anna

“Societies always do their events in the evenings... that’s the hardest bit about being a commuter... If they do it at 7 to 8, I’m not going to get home until 10 so I’m not going.”- Anna

"I have to wake up ridiculously early and then I get stuck in traffic and then I'm late or... I'd get there, I'd pay for my parking, and then I get an email saying my lecture was cancelled". - Erin

"It was nerve-wracking and when I first started, it felt like everyone had made friends with who they're in a flat with... which was a bit awkward". - Erin

“My wellbeing was declining a bit just [from] transport and going to uni. ” - Nico

Commuting Experience

Logistics and Travel Modes

30% of students questioned the value of commuting in for a single hour lecture

One-way commutes range from a 10-minute cycle to 3.5 hours via public transport.

The “Marathon” Day

- 60% of the students said timetables cause them a lot of headache, for some of them especially because they have to wake up very early (around 6:00 AM) to reach the morning class, spend the whole day on campus and wait for an evening class or workshop.

Commuting Advantages

- Reduced costs
- Staying with family or in a "comfortable environment”
- Maintaining existing jobs/social circles

Challenges

- Getting stuck in traffic
- Waking up "ridiculously early"
- Being unable to attend evening socials

"If I was living at uni those two days [off] they will just be wasted... whereas I can come home, I can work, and make money in those two days."- Otto

Belonging and Barriers

Social and Physical Barriers

- Commuters feel systematically excluded from social life because most society events occur between 6:00 PM and 9:00 PM, when many are already "drained" and need to travel home.
- A recurring theme is the feeling of exclusion from the "flatmate" bond. Commuters often feel they miss out on organic social milestones, like "doing a big shop" together.
- The library is the most vital "third space" for commuters, serving as a "home base" between lectures. Half of the commuters mentioned the lack of space. Some conversations highlighted that the library and cafes are too crowded and there aren't enough social (non-quiet) zones between lectures.
- Commuters often struggle to integrate their home/family lives with the university social fabric.
- Training for 'how to run a society' is vital - what is the point in waiting to attend one if the person running it hasn't done a great job. It's not their fault, but they need to be shown how to run it.

> "They need to make more places where commuter students can stay or hang out; because sometimes after their lectures they try to go to the library and the library is just full of people, so you can't really just..., it's just too crowded sometimes." - Aaron

Academic and Social Support Networks

Institutional Support

- **45% of the commuters explicitly expressed satisfaction with the existence of student support services such as well-being services or tutors. Although not all necessarily visit or use them, they are aware that their universities offer such services. Magda (mature) benefited from services such as “free screening” for mental health purposes.**
- **Anya found the student tutor service (older students) very helpful; Erin appreciated tutors who had commuted themselves and understood the struggle.**
- **Students find that university support is often "not obvious" unless they are "actively searching". Leroy and Ella feel support is mentioned at induction, but not "brought forward properly" afterward.**



1. Most students **rely heavily on family and home friends for emotional support.**
2. 75% said that they **primarily make friends with other commuters** who share the same travel frustrations.
3. The SU Gap: There is a perception that Student Unions primarily offer ***"nightlife"* or *"parties",* which are inaccessible or unappealing to many commuters.**
4. Groups: **Sport** is often seen as a primary social anchor; Anya and Nico found commuter-specific meet-ups or **"speed friending"** helpful.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Impact of the Commute

- Students connect commuting to "making mental health worse" due to the constant worry about transport. The fatigue of long days leads many to go "straight to bed" upon returning home.

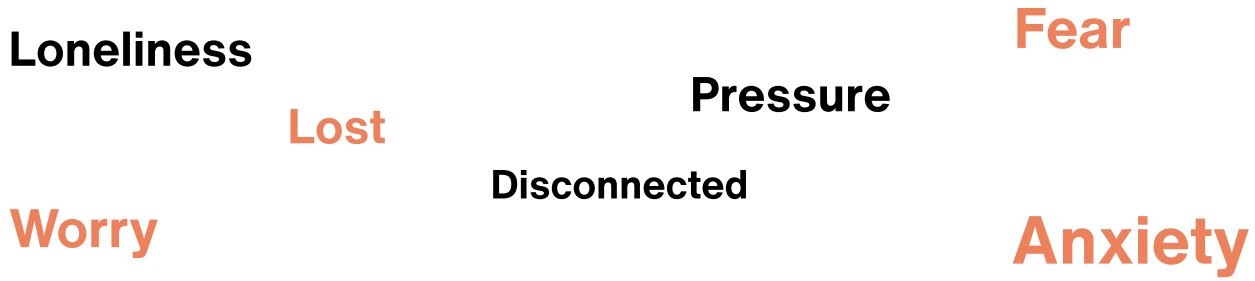
- Students report dealing with "loneliness" and "burnout" from attending only lectures without "human connection". Richard noted university can be a "lonely experience" where one might not speak to anyone all day.

"I deal with loneliness more often... I feel some loneliness and like I'm not connecting with people... because I only attend lectures... not events... I'm disconnected to people."
Ella

"There is quite a lack of emotional support. I know I have a personal tutor, but she never contacted me and I never contacted her, I don't actually know what I can ask her for."
Magda

Anthony feels daily pressure checking bus timings to avoid being late

Richard observed that many bright students "disappear" and drop out because they "don't make those personal connections" and feel "at sea" in the social environment.



Withdrawal

65% stated they were determined to continue with their studies

Reasons to Leave

- Course is too challenging
- Poorly prepared for approach to University (learning style)
- Fatigued by travel
- Would prefer a practical pathway (Apprenticeship)
- Course is enjoyable but not useful
- Lonely and have not connected with anyone (enough to stay)

Motivations

"Having a degree is my dream"

"Employability and Mental Stimulation"

"Seeing others suffering 'by your side' is plenty of motivation for me"

Guided Recommendations



Acknowledgements and Reflections

“The ecosystem of support surrounding students who commute is evident, however, the students within this survey identified a number of reasonable adjustments to the experience which would provide a reduction in stress, fatigue and and increase in belonging and engagement. With belonging such a predictor of confidence, happiness and success the stories shared in this research are not unique, but reflected in commuter student experiences across the UK and if responded to, would dramatically improve the experience.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to our partners at Royal Holloway University London and Brunel Students Union, whose commitment to understanding and improving the commuter student experience made this research possible. Their openness, curiosity, and willingness to interrogate long-standing assumptions created the conditions for a study that is deeply grounded in lived experience. We are equally grateful to the students who shared their stories with honesty and courage; their insights sit at the heart of this work”.

Katherine Allan | Founder Campus to Campus

Guided Recommendations

Overview

Many of the recommendations emerging from the focus groups centred on creating earlier and more intentional opportunities for connection in the first year, recognising that commuter students often face a longer and more fragile window for forming friendships than their on-campus peers. Students emphasised the value of commuter-specific social and sports spaces, alongside practical adjustments to timetables, support, and transport. While more than 65% of respondents expressed a strong desire to continue their studies, their engagement was often driven by obligation rather than joy. Yet the solutions they proposed are both realistic and within reach and, if implemented, would significantly enhance their experience of university life.

- University-only shuttle buses to improve reliability and reduce disruption caused by delayed or cancelled public transport
- Travel grants, commuter bursaries, or transport subsidies to offset costs. Onsite temporary accommodation for exam periods cited as really useful
- Support services become more visible, proactive and easier to access, both online and on campus
- Actively contact students with low attendance or signs of disengagement rather than waiting for students to seek help independently
- Mandatory meetings, regular check-ins, and more structured tutor engagement to support quieter or less confident student
- Students consistently recommended avoiding 9:00 AM starts, particularly due to transport delays and long commuting times

Guided Recommendations

- Earlier finishes and more compact timetables to reduce unnecessary time spent waiting on campus. Societies and groups which meet in the day time would be really helpful
- Greater notice for timetable changes was recommended, especially for students balancing childcare, work, or caring responsibilities.
- Lecture recordings, seminar recordings, and transcripts to improve accessibility for commuters, visual learners, and students delayed by travel disruption
- Commuter-specific drop-in sessions for those who miss early mornning classes
- Commuter-focused societies and spaces would make attending campus for shorter teaching periods feel more worthwhile and sustainable
- Libraries were often described as overcrowded or unsuitable for relaxation, leading students to request quieter and more informal spaces
- “Living room” style environments and dedicated commuter hubs where students could eat, rest, or socialise comfortably
- Table tennis or games areas to encourage interaction and reduce isolation

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