



Commuter Students Focus Groups



Troy Wey
Research & Insights Team
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Introduction

In collaboration with Mia Stevens (Undergraduate Education Officer) and Jordan Fung (Science and Engineering Faculty Rep), the R&I team spoke with 11 self-identified commuter students across two online focus groups. The students were from variety of backgrounds, study levels and courses at the University of Bristol, excluding first year students. The research focused on understanding commuter students' experiences with transport, timetabling, teaching, barriers they face and broader university life.

Key takeaways

Difficulty Commuting

Commuter students **face long commutes, often across multiple modes of transport**, which can be unreliable, infrequent, expensive and indirect. This **limits their ability to participate in many aspects of university life**.

Timetabling and Campus Accessibility

Timetabling of academic studies and social events is a key factor for commuter students, dictating what they can and cannot attend. Anything scheduled in the **early mornings, evenings and weekends is a barrier** to attendance due to lengthy commutes.

Barriers to socialising

Being a commuter student impacts their **ability to socialise and join societies**, partly due to inaccessible scheduling of activities. This **negatively affects their sense of belonging** at university and leads to feelings of loneliness for many.

Inequities in Learning and Support

Consistent provision of online lectures, office hours, resources and support services is important for when commuting is not an option, but this is not always provided through all courses, modules and support services.

Recommendations

- Provide greater guidance and support for commuter students regarding **transport options**, and actively lobby for reduced travel costs.
- Increase recognition of the challenges faced by commuter students in **timetabling** by:
 - Releasing timetables earlier,
 - Honouring timetable/schedule change requests where possible, and
 - Working towards more condensed teaching schedules.
- Offer more **events and society activities** at times accessible to commuter students, for example, during the middle of the day or with flexible start and finish times.
- Ensure consistent access to **online resources**, including recorded lectures, virtual or flexible office hours, e-books, and online student support services.

Findings

Difficulty Commuting

Many students cannot commute directly from home to campus and must use multiple modes of transport, making journeys both time-consuming and costly. Because of this:

- Students carefully plan their commutes, **weighing up routes, schedules, and financial constraints** to find the most economical options.
- Transport was commonly described as **expensive, crowded, unreliable, and infrequent**, requiring students to allow extra time, particularly for 9 a.m. classes.

Students suggested the University could provide more support for commuters by:

- Helping to reduce travel costs
- Offering clearer guidance on transport options, reliability, and crowding
- Assisting with journey planning
- Extending bus passes to cover the full year, including the summer period

I don't want to stay on campus for 8 hours when I have something at 9am and something at 5pm. I either miss one lecture, or I miss both as it doesn't make sense to stay on campus for 8 hours.

...if I did have an early class the bus makes it difficult to make this as everything is by the hour meaning that I have to take an earlier bus

Timetabling and Campus Accessibility

Scheduling and timetabling were identified as key factors shaping commuter students' university experience, with students reporting that early morning (9 a.m.), evening, and weekend sessions are particularly difficult to attend. This is due to:

- **Lengthy and costly commutes** that often lead to **fatigue** from extended travel.
- **Limited transport options** at certain times, with rush-hour congestion further increasing journey times.

Some students said they **had to book hotels to attend early morning lectures**, and many felt that **more condensed timetables** would help justify travel time and costs. Some admitted to missing lectures when classes were too spread out, as returning home between sessions was not feasible. **Timely communication** about timetables and cancellations was viewed as essential to help commuters plan travel and secure cheaper transport tickets in advance.

Students also suggested providing more on-campus spaces to:

- Eat and refrigerate/heat their own food
- Socialise between classes
- Study while waiting between lectures

"I needed to stay at a hotel the night before..." (due to decreased train availability in their area to reach campus on time).

Barriers to socialising and sense of belonging

Some students have **suffered from loneliness and isolation**, reporting that they would like to join societies and attend socials but being unable to due to commuting/transport issues. They noted most **student group activities and social events** are during evenings or weekends, and are **not justifiable to commute to** if this is the only thing they have that day.

I am feeling rather lonely...I've joined societies but not engaged with them.

I have definitely observed a marked difference in my social life (since moving to new commuter accommodation). The decrease in quality of social life was more than expected.

To help overcome this issue, students suggested:

- Having events which are on for longer periods, allowing for more flexibility on timings.
- Sharing which society events regularly occur on specific days and times.
- Having social events/activities on during the middle of weekdays, rather than evenings or weekends.

Inequities in Learning and Support

Students agreed that attending university in-person is beneficial, but felt **being able to access resources online** is necessary for times when commuting is not possible. There is a noted **lack of consistency in the provision of online options**, with not all courses/modules offering recorded lectures. Students also reported **missing out on opportunities** such as poster events and giveaways due to a lack of online options or coordination around these events.

Students highlighted the importance of consistent provision of online options for:

- Lectures
- Office hours (or flexibility around in-person office hour time slots)
- Support services e.g. study skills, wellbeing, disability services
- Books and readings e.g. ebooks

I've interacted with disability services and careers services and they always offered me an online option which made me feel I was capable of accessing these services.

I like having the option of being online as if the buses break down, it's good that I know I can just go online.