



# LIVING AND STUDYING AT HOME

Degrees of Inequality

Sheila Riddell, Lyn Tett, Hazel Christie,  
Rachael King, Sofia Shan

 GREAT DEBATES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

# LIVING AND STUDYING AT HOME

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# ABSTRACT

*This book is about students who live at home and commute to university rather than moving into student accommodation during term time. It is based on a case study of an old Scottish university that has traditionally had a low proportion of commuting students. The impact of commuting is examined through a social justice lens since commuting students are more likely to be from a lower socioeconomic background, be mature, be from minority ethnic communities and be disabled. We explore the measures which may be needed to tackle the negative outcomes often experienced by commuter students. These include more flexible timetabling, suitable social spaces and the routine availability of online learning resources in addition to face-to-face teaching. Economic inequalities might be addressed through targeted travel grants and subsidised accommodation. Based on case study findings, we argue that there is a need for financial, cultural and pedagogical change within universities so that the needs and interests of commuter students become a central rather than peripheral concern.*

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE AIM OF THE BOOK

This book explores the social characteristics, experiences and outcomes of commuting students using a case study of an ‘old’ Scottish university. It is unusual in viewing commuting through a social justice lens rather than focusing solely on the way in which commuters navigate home and university identities. Throughout the book we identify how commuting may exacerbate the social inequalities of students that are already marginalised and consider what steps might be taken by universities to redress the social inequalities identified. To do this, we highlight any disproportionate representation among specific social cohorts within the commuting student population as recommended by Phillips (2004). We also suggest actions for the future that might lead to more inclusive universities that respond to the diverse needs of all their students.

## UNDERSTANDING COMMUTING

There are several ways in which commuting can be defined and we are using a straightforward measure that categorises students

as commuters if their term time and vacation addresses are the same, and non-commuters as those whose term time and vacation addresses are different, indicating a move from home to the university during the semester. Living at home has long been a feature of students' experience of higher education (HE) across the UK, and Donnelly and Gamsu (2018) point out that 55% of UK students attend a university close to home with many of this group commuting for all or part of their university career. However, only one in ten students attends a university over 150 miles from their home and these long-distance movers have very specific social characteristics relating to social class, ethnicity and region. They are much more likely to be from socially advantaged backgrounds, privately educated, of white or Chinese heritage and from the south east of England (Thomas, 2019). Commuting students are more likely to be from a low socioeconomic background, be mature, be from minority ethnic communities and be disabled and so we pay specific attention to students with these social characteristics throughout the book.

This research is based in an old Scottish university because, until recently, universities of this type had low rates of commuting overall and a higher proportion of long-distance movers. This meant that they did not see the need to adapt their academic and social curriculum to meet the needs of students travelling to the university from home. The recent increase in the number of commuter students has been driven by several factors including compulsory home learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost-of-living crisis and efforts to widen access which have increased the number of students from less advantaged backgrounds. This means that universities are having to adapt rapidly to meet commuting students' needs.

Much previous work has focused on the way in which commuting students negotiate their identities in moving between home and university (e.g. Holton & Finn, 2018). This book examines students' experiences and outcomes

through a social justice lens, drawing on the work of Phillips (2004), who invites us to focus on inequalities in both participation and outcomes. We question what actions are required to ameliorate negative outcomes for commuting students, but also explore the redistributive measures which may be needed to address disproportionalities in the social characteristics of students who make the decision to commute.

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

The book comprises eight chapters that draw on data from a research project designed to examine commuter students' experience and outcomes and the implications for the case study university. Throughout the book we embed these data in the wider literature to explore how universities can positively build on their students' diversity and difference to develop mechanisms that enable them to support commuting students appropriately.

In *Chapter 2*, we first review the literature on the characteristics of students that commute and find that these students are more likely to be from a lower socio-economic group; be the first generation in their family to attend HE; have a low income; be mature; have family or carer responsibilities and be from a Black or other minority ethnic (BAME) background. The pros of commuting are that students may avoid having to take out loans, continue to work in part-time jobs and enjoy the emotional and social support of their networks of family and friends. The cons are that commuting students may only be able to choose from a restricted number of universities, thus limiting their future career options. In addition, they may have little access to informal peer support, welfare services

and social activities and this may lead them to withdraw from their studies.

Drawing on the literature, we use a mixed methods approach to find out the views of the commuting students in this case study university. The first method was an analysis of administrative data on the commuter students in their first year of university study, followed by an on-line survey to all widening participation (WP) undergraduates, a group that the literature had identified as particularly likely to commute. We then conducted individual interviews with a purposive sample of 20 commuter students varying in relation to their key characteristics (e.g. social class, ethnicity, age, distance of commute). Combining these methods enabled us to understand the material reality of students' lives with which their everyday experiences are contextualised.

*Chapter 3* examines the social dynamics shaping the experiences of commuting students to explore existing inequalities for specific social groups. It then draws on two sets of data. The first is administrative data from the case study university and the second is the analysis of the student responses to the on-line questionnaire. By synthesising insights from university administrative datasets alongside survey responses obtained from Scottish-domiciled WP students, our aim was to identify any disproportionate representation among specific social cohorts within the commuting student population. Our analysis showed that understanding the unique needs and experiences of commuter students was crucial if universities are to provide effective support and foster a conducive learning environment for this student population. In so doing, universities can create more inclusive and accommodating educational environments for all students, regardless of their commuting status.

*Chapter 4* reviews the impact of socio-economic status (SES) on students' experiences of commuting. It is the first of

four chapters that draw on the individual interviews to examine the experiences of commuter students that have particular social characteristics. The chapter begins by reviewing the impact of coming from a low SES background, drawing attention to the ways in which this group can be excluded from full participation in the life of the university. Short case studies are then presented to illustrate the experiences of four students from low SES backgrounds followed by a contrasting case of a more advantaged student. The conclusion explores the difficult journey into and through the university that students experience, demonstrating that accessing the university is just the start and that support is necessary to ensure that there are opportunities once at university. It also discusses the action that universities might take to develop mechanisms that enable them to take account of their students' diversity and difference including the need to value and respect these students' experiences.

*Chapter 5* explores the complex relationship between being mature and commuting to university. Although the mature students in this study were generally satisfied with the commuting experience, they still faced challenges in engaging with the university community and meeting the norms and expectations of how they should perform as students. None of the students relied on university for their social lives, although the sense of feeling 'different' was noted by both younger mature students. Mature students actively chose to commute rather than live in student accommodation or pay for expensive rent in the city because, with relatively convenient transport links, they were able to commute some distance, enabling them to stay within their established home lives and communities. They all felt that neither the university support services nor their communications acknowledged commuter students. For example, they commented that earlier access to their timetable at the beginning of each semester would enable

them to plan both travel and employment more easily. The mature students had busy lives, but they showed a strong commitment to learn and expand their knowledge in areas that captivated their interest. It is argued that to build on this commitment, the university needs to establish robust support systems and raise awareness of what is available to mature students. With these systems in place, these students would be able to become more socially and academically integrated and hence more likely to persist with their studies.

*Chapter 6* explores the experiences of BAME students and illustrates that inequalities in access and participation in HE remain. The students' main reason for commuting was financial because their parents were unable to support them to stay in university accommodation. What commuting did allow was the possibility of maintaining strong connections with extended family who lived locally. The students found the university to be a diverse community, in contrast to the whiteness of their schools, and they gravitated to societies where they could meet other BAME students. These provided a welcome respite from other social activities which the students avoided because they did not drink alcohol. Non-engagement in extra-curricular activities was due to a lack of available time, the timings of the activities and to the lack of cultural sensitivity and awareness in the design of the activities. Studying at home was far from ideal. Even if the students had any energy left after their commute, conditions were problematic whether due to overcrowding or noise. The chapter ends by discussing the ambiguities of living at home since it can provide strong familial support but can also be instrumental in contributing to anxiety, under-performance and dropout.

*Chapter 7* begins with an overview of patterns of participation and social characteristics of disabled students in HE, drawing attention to the rapid growth of this group, particularly those with mental health difficulties. Short vignettes are then presented to illustrate the experiences of disabled

commuter students, providing insights into the difficulties they encounter in both academic and social aspects of their lives. The chapter shows that, while they appreciated the practical and financial benefits of living at home, they felt that this was a forced choice because they were disadvantaged relative to students who had the freedom to immerse themselves in university life. The case study students had all experienced a range of disabling conditions prior to university entry, but the academic and social pressures of student life, alongside the marginalisation associated with commuting, heightened their sense of anxiety. They also found it almost impossible to enlist support from the university disability office, partly because of the limited time they spent on the university campus. The chapter illuminates the complex relationship between being a disabled student and commuting to university, whether by choice or necessity. It shows that, once admitted to a particular course, disabled students still have to engage in a daily struggle to access buildings, course materials and examinations in addition to developing social networks and negotiating identity. For disabled students who live at home, these challenges are amplified.

*Chapter 8* summarises the factors that led students to commute and the positive and negative impacts of those decisions. It then turns to a discussion of how universities might be more responsive to the home and community factors that have had a negative effect on commuting students. It argues that institutions need to overhaul their normative conceptions of being a student, recognising that the model of university life where students move to the university rather than living at home, is no longer fit for purpose. However, particularly in institutions such as the older universities where most students live in university accommodation or student flats during term time, it is important to question whether commuting students experience greater disadvantage. Phillips (2004) provides a clear lens

through which to examine such inequalities. She argues that where marked social disproportionalities exist, we should work on the assumption that structural inequalities are responsible and consider both the effects of these inequalities and what needs to be done to counter their impact. Since university and post-university careers are likely to be affected by both academic success and social networks, commuting students may have less satisfactory experiences at university and start their working lives at a marked disadvantage, amplifying their existing economic inequality. The chapter then discusses what universities could do to respond more effectively to the academic and social needs of commuter students including: more responsive timetabling; suitable social spaces; on-line learning resources in addition to face-to-face teaching; targeted travel grants and subsidised accommodation. These changes to university structures and culture would then ensure that commuter students are regarded as an important part of the university community rather than as an anomaly.