



Using technology to create a 'commuter compassionate' learning experience in higher education

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Economic
and Social
Research Council

Overview



Context: The challenge and how the project addresses it

Theoretical frame: Whole provider approach

Findings: The commute, the academic experience and wider student experience, and institutional invisibility

Activity: Digital solutions to commuter student challenges

Recommendations for institutional change: Quick wins and institutional transformation

Conclusions and discussion: Q&A

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HE sector in Ireland,
Technological
Universities
Association and N-
TUTORR, 2025

Report



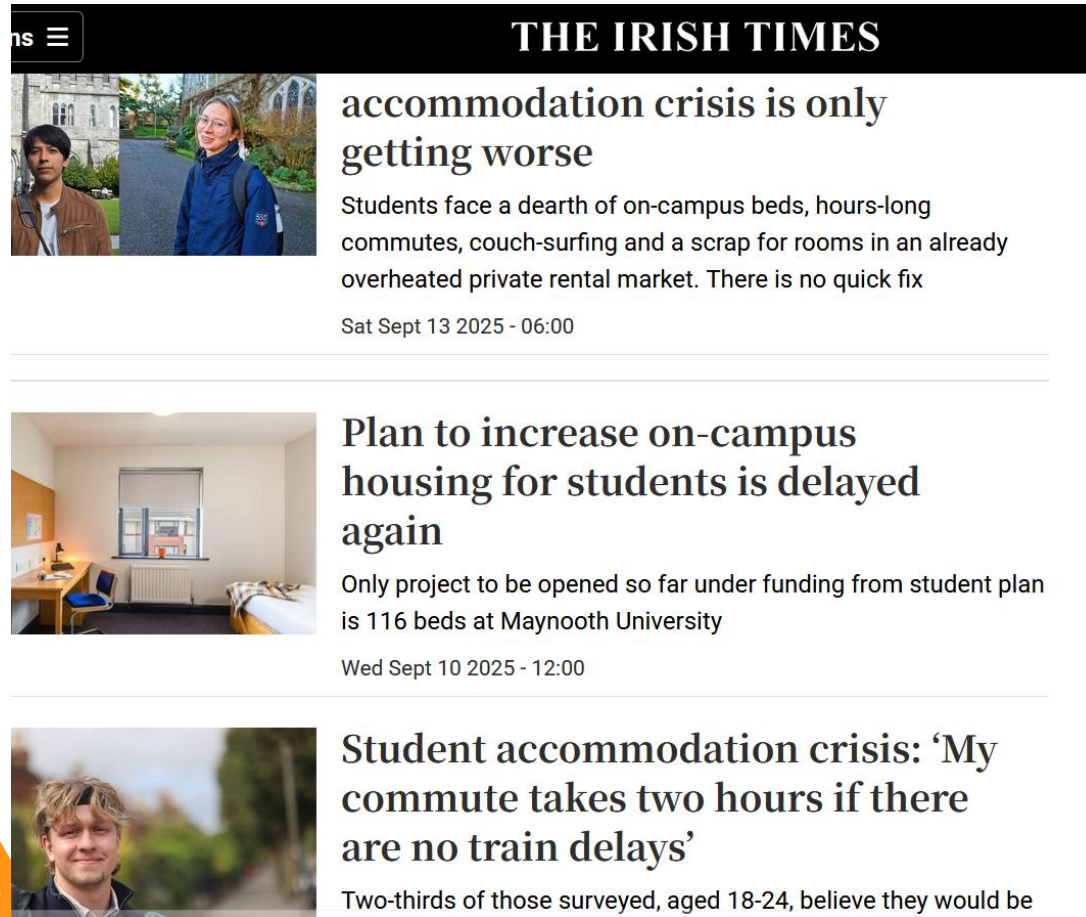
**Commuter students:
A student-centred, whole
provider approach to improve
student experiences and
outcomes in technological
higher education in Ireland**

Context

- In Ireland more than 60% of students remain at home and commute to college. 42% live with parents and a further 22% live with their partner or children (Eurostudent 8)
- Research in the UK found commuter students have lower engagement, and lower satisfaction and this correlates with lower success: continuation, completion, attainment and graduate employment.
- Research in 2025 was developed to explore the issue of commuter students in Ireland.



Accommodation and commuting



The screenshot shows three news articles from The Irish Times. The first article, dated Saturday, September 13, 2025, at 06:00, is titled 'accommodation crisis is only getting worse' and features a photo of two students. The second article, dated Wednesday, September 10, 2025, at 12:00, is titled 'Plan to increase on-campus housing for students is delayed again' and features a photo of a student room. The third article, dated the same day, is titled 'Student accommodation crisis: 'My commute takes two hours if there are no train delays'' and features a photo of a student.

THE IRISH TIMES

accommodation crisis is only getting worse

Students face a dearth of on-campus beds, hours-long commutes, couch-surfing and a scrap for rooms in an already overheated private rental market. There is no quick fix

Sat Sept 13 2025 - 06:00

Plan to increase on-campus housing for students is delayed again

Only project to be opened so far under funding from student plan is 116 beds at Maynooth University

Wed Sept 10 2025 - 12:00

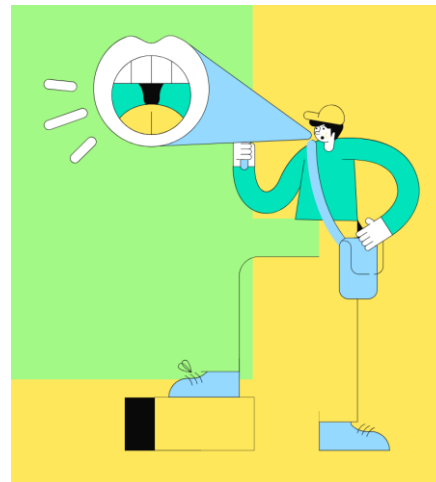
Student accommodation crisis: 'My commute takes two hours if there are no train delays'

Two-thirds of those surveyed, aged 18-24, believe they would be

- Accommodation is the biggest cost-of-living challenge faced by young people and students, according to the National Youth Council of Ireland.
- The student accommodation crisis is getting worse.
- Commuters in Ireland - including students - have long commute times. The average student commute time is 52 minutes one way. 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)

Research questions

- i. How does being a commuter student impact on student experiences and outcomes in technological HEIs in Ireland?
- ii. How can technological HEIs improve the experience and outcomes of commuter students?

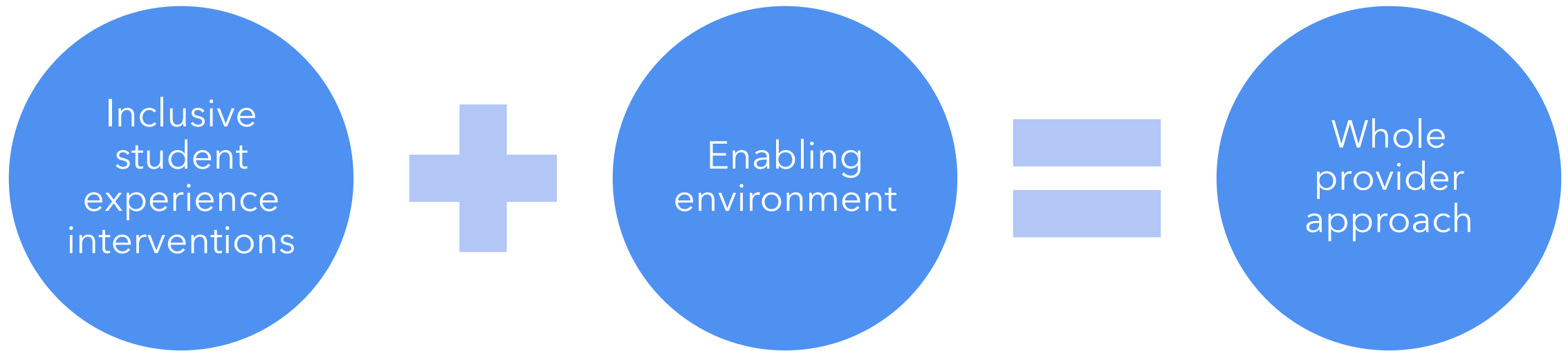


Research methods

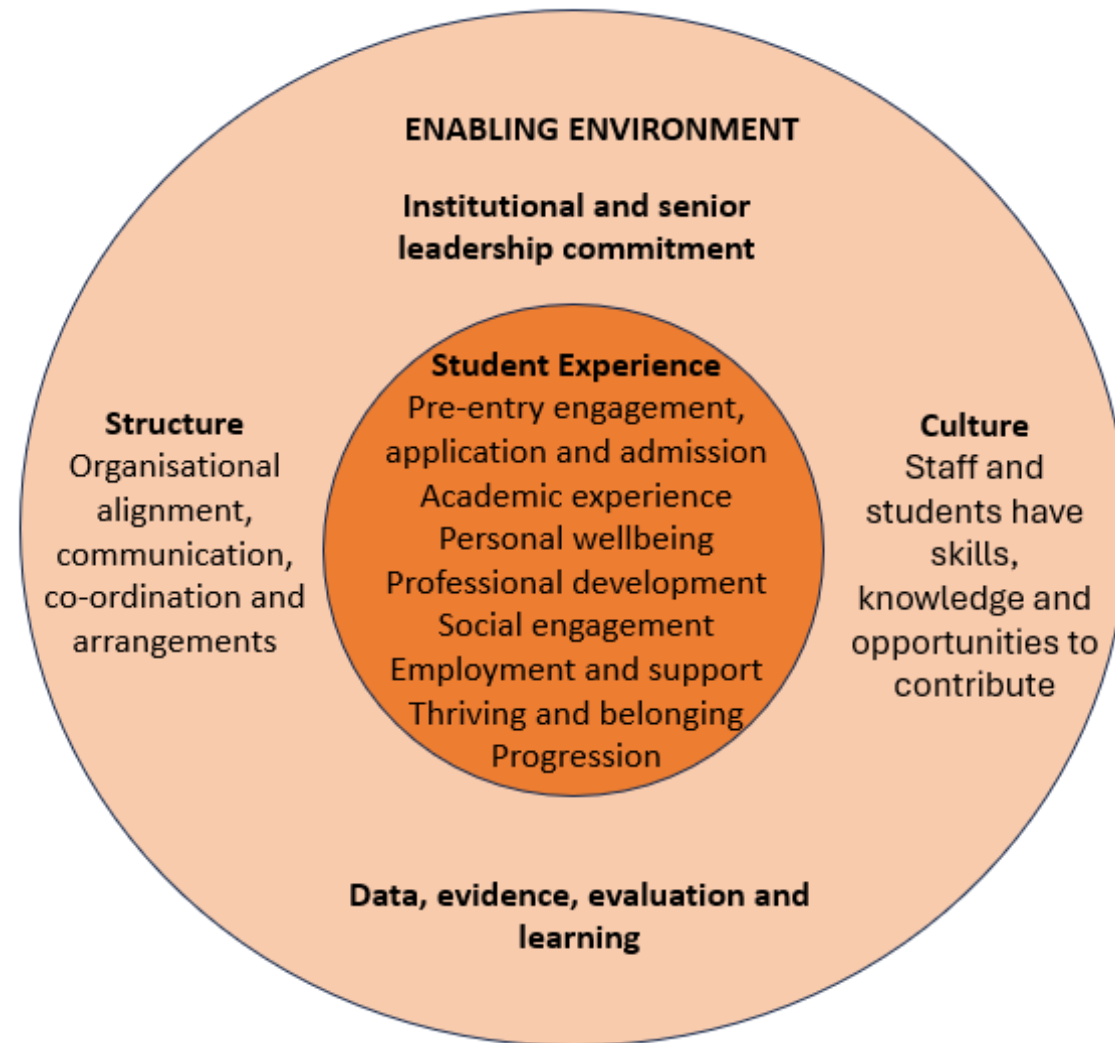
- Semi-structured review of HEI websites.
- Two online town hall focus groups.
- 33 THFG participants from four HEIs. Mostly students (27) and 6 staff members. 8 of the students were trained as facilitators and 'jurors'.



Conceptual framing: Whole provider approach



Whole provider approach





The Commute

The commute I take is 2hr 30 mins each way. I take the bus and travel 3 to 4 times a week. The good points of the commute: toilet on board and [I'm able] to charge electronic facilities [sic]. The challenges are the time lost and late for the first class in the morning.

I think overall commuting can be expensive between diesel and car maintenance costs, as well as buying meals in college.

[I'm] very tired throughout the day and when I get home, due to early starts. But having assignments etc to finish when I get home leads to me having less time to myself and poor sleep, usually late for my classes so am missing crucial time.

I commute every day, train often is delayed. I get the earliest train and the first bus possible but am usually 5-10 mins late for my classes. The train times are inconvenient with my timetable for going home as I'm usually left with 15 mins to get across the city to catch train or left for nearly 2 hours waiting for one. Busses can often be full at the end of the day and if I can't get on then I'm also more than likely missing my train home.

Challenges and disadvantages

Length of journey

Waking up early

Always tired

Limited number of buses or trains per day

Poor connections resulting in rushing, missing connections and long waits

Late running buses or trains

Cancelled buses and other delays

Parking(lack of available spaces, may need to walk further and then late to class, or arrive very early even if you do not have a class until later in the day)

Weather - cold and wet

Arriving late or missing classes

Finding sufficient time for self-study

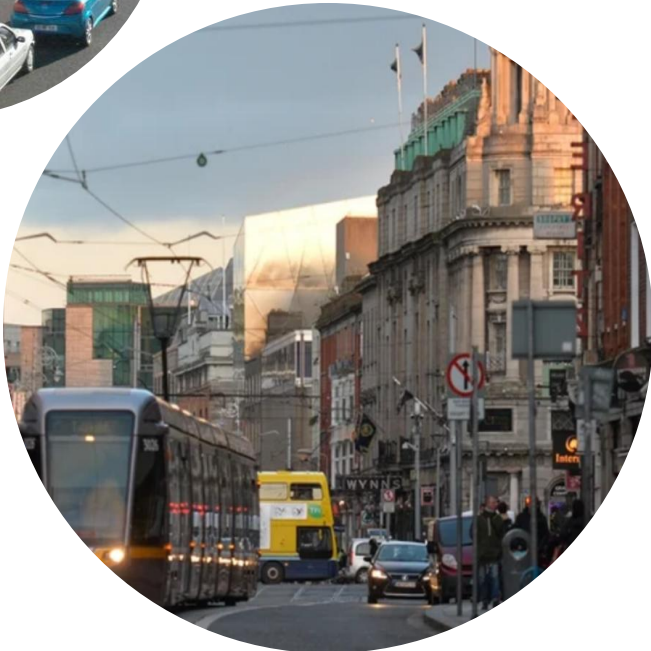
No place to spend time on campus if you have to wait for transport.

Difficult to engage socially with friends

Health and wellbeing

Financial impact

Commuter students want:



Financial support to help with transport costs and food on campus

Increase the number of buses, or provide private buses between HEIs and transport hubs or popular commuter locations

Encouragement and support for car sharing



Inclusive academic
experience?

Impacts academic success by having wasted hours each day stuck on a bus or waiting for buses that get delayed or don't show up. By the time I get home I've no time or energy to do study... Have to come early and leave late to avoid traffic, buses are a shambles and waste valuable time that I could be doing my college work sitting on the bus.



Commuting impacts on attendance three ways: arriving late due to delays; skipping lectures and using time in ways deemed more efficient; leaving early due misalignment of the teaching and travel timetables.



Commuting reduces time and wellbeing that impact negatively on independent study and academic outcomes.

Organisational issues

There's really been not a single adjustment in my college during my course of study so I would say it's affected me a lot but I just have to deal with it.

Negatively. No flexibility to support students who are commuting.

Education is tailored to people who are close to the campus or who live on campus. They seem to forget that some people are commuting over 2 hours to just get to class.


Staff attitudes and institutional culture

Staff try to be lenient, especially if you have to leave a few minutes early to make it for the bus. They are understanding if you are late etc.

...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.

More negatively seen as an outcast compared to students who live on campus or near campus.

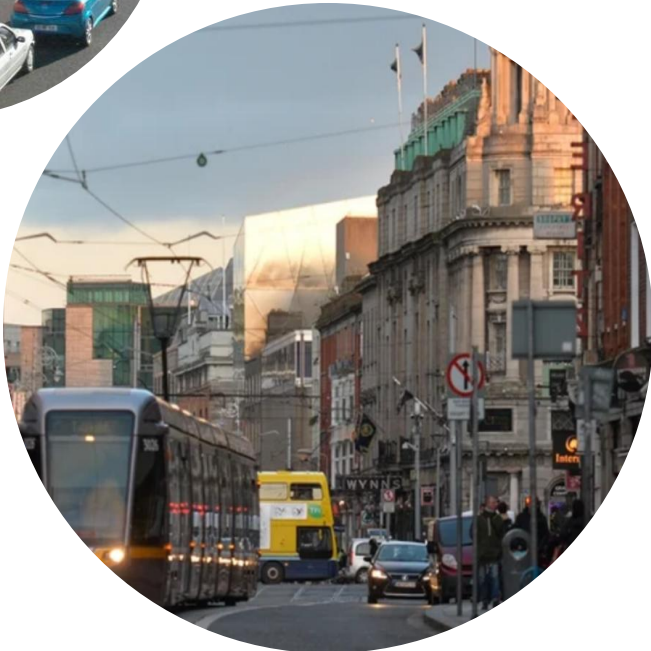
Perception of engagement - staff may view commuter students as less engaged in lectures if they skip them (due to travel time/cost/only 1 or 2 lectures that day) or do not sign up for clubs & societies.



The academic experience is
not inclusive of commuter
students

This is reinforced by the review of institutional websites. There are very few courses available through blended or flexible delivery and learning and teaching policies do not address commuter students directly

Commuter students want a compassionate response



Commuter compassionate timetable

Commuter compassionate attendance policy


Greater use of online learning resources and attendance

Commuter compassionate timing of assessments

More flexible academic support

Group working guidelines

Staff development



Inclusive wider
student
experience?

Students are largely resigned to not engaging in the wider student experience



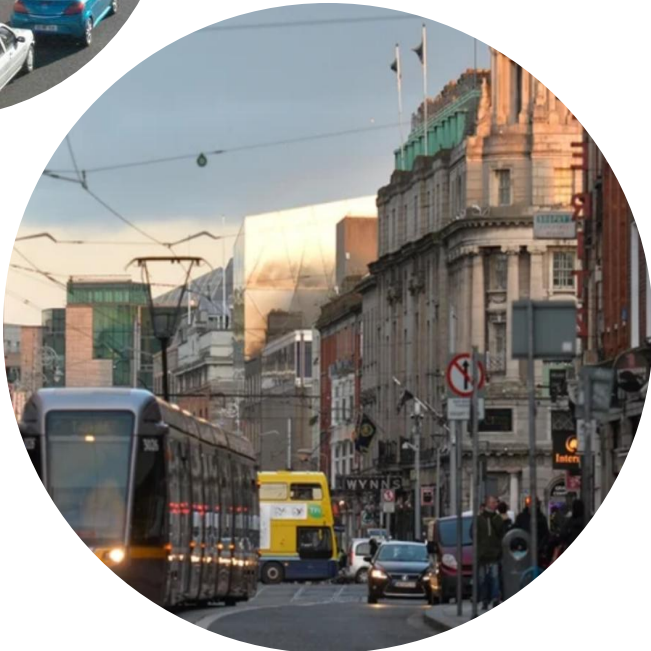
The social side of college is non-existent, I have to arrange transport because trains stop at a certain time.

Negatively, makes socialising more difficult as there are restrictive bus times, and further distances to travel to get home.

Negatively socially, can't park overnight so even if I had a place to stay I can't go out very often.

Food places close early which can affect students that may want to study at the library after lectures.

Commuter students want:



Online student support services

More information about the opportunities and support that is available

Daytime events

Alternative opportunities for engagement

Commuter student voice and representation



Institutional invisibility on websites

The review of websites suggests a partial and inconsistent approach to enabling commuter students to access and succeed. This is reinforced through the qualitative research with commuter students .

Review of institutional websites found

institutional invisibility of commuter students

- **Explicit recognition:** Very few mentions of commuters on websites, including lack of information for students commuting rather than relocating.
- **Institutional commitment:** Strategic documents on websites demonstrate a commitment to regions, but not to explicitly to local students. References in learning and teaching and equality, diversity and inclusion documents do not identify commuter students, or their specific needs.
- **Academic experience:** Websites promote flexible or blended learning courses, but these do not appear to be for full-time undergraduate students, and there is little information about how to study flexibly. L&T policies tend to talk of inclusive learning and Universal Design for Learning, but these do not necessarily meet the flexibility needs of commuters.
- **Wider student experience:** Most websites have lots of information about student accommodation and relocating to a new city or region, and there is little or no equivalent information for commuters; there are very few commuter student stories or narratives on the websites; no mention of commuter students can benefit from clubs, societies and sports offered by HEIs.
- **Invisibility:** Inconsistent representation of commuter students, lack of information and general institutional invisibility.



Activity: Walking in
their shoes – and
identifying digital
solutions

Commuter student personas

All the students feel commuting is affecting their academic attainment, social integration and wellbeing. Select one student, identify a way in which the institution creates or re-enforces the student's challenges and propose one "Commuter Compassionate" digital solution.

Siobhan

- **Profile:** 35, Nursing student, mother of two primary school children.
- **The Commute:** Approximately 45-minute drive each way (depending on traffic).
- **The Friction:** 9:00 AM lectures are a high-stress gamble with traffic. If a lecture runs 10 minutes over, she is late for school pickup.

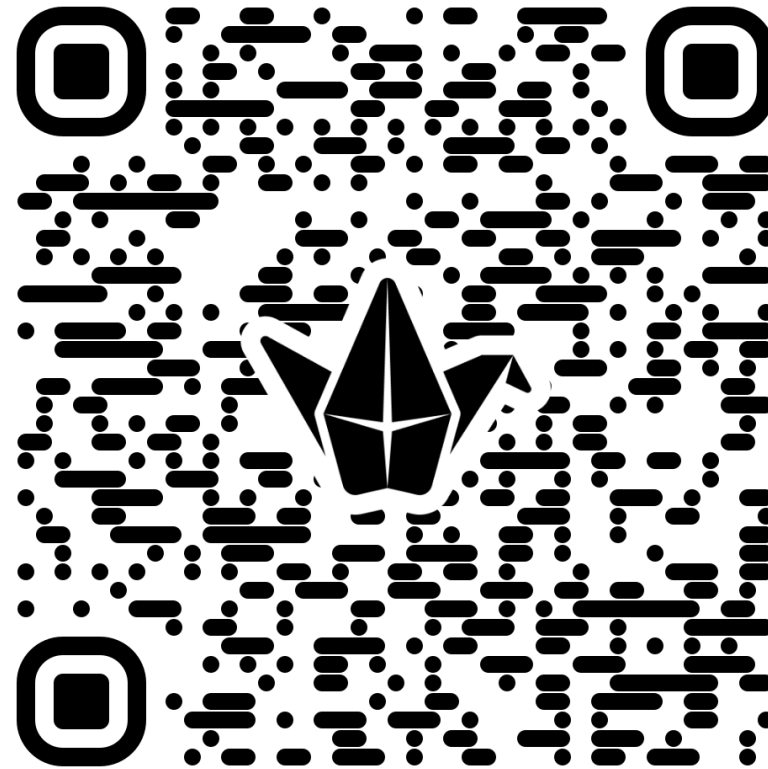
Liam

- **Profile:** 20, Business student, works 20 hours a week in retail to cover rising costs.
- **The Commute:** 1 hour 20 minutes involving a bus and a train.
- **The Friction:** "Dead time." He spends 13+ hours a week in transit but can't use a laptop on a crowded bus. He feels disconnected from campus life because he has to rush to work shifts immediately after class.

Alex

- **Profile:** 19, Creative Media student, diagnosed with ADHD.
- **The Commute:** 40-minute bus journey.
- **The Friction:** The sensory overload of a noisy bus, combined with the mental effort of tracking bus times and stop changes, leaves Alex "mentally drained" before they even step into the lecture hall. If the bus is late, the resulting anxiety makes it impossible to focus on the first half of class.

Go to the
[Padlet](#) to
write in your
answers





A whole provider approach?

The research suggests limited recognition, adaptation and support to enable commuter students to access and succeed in higher education.

Enabling environment: Institutional conditions to facilitate an inclusive student experience

- **Institutional and senior leadership commitment:** Websites and institutional policies indicate lack of institutional commitment to commuter students. Commuter students are largely explicitly and implicitly absent in the contents of websites and texts of institutional documents.
- **Structure (policies and processes):** Timetabling, attendance, use of the VLE, provision of support, organisation of the wider student experience and student representation do not prioritise or recognise commuter students, and many disadvantage them.
- **Structure (communication):** Communication with and about commuter students is poor, e.g. by and to teaching staff, institutional catering and with transportation companies.
- **Culture (staff):** HEIs are not permeated by empathy towards and validation of commuter students. Some staff are understanding and supportive. Others are not, and this is reinforced by the institutional processes that do not require staff to have awareness, commitment and skills to ensure the inclusion of commuter students.
- **Culture (students):** Acceptance by commuter students themselves of their position; and not opportunities for them to have a voice and inform decision making.
- **Data and evidence:** No national or institutional definitions of commuter students and data is not widely collected about commuter student status, other characteristics, experiences and outcomes. Students want staff to know about their commuter students, to provide feedback and inform decision making.



Recommendations





Conclusions

- The research suggests that to date there has been very little deliberate or explicit adaptation of HEIs to the needs of commuter students, despite recognition of an acute national shortage of student accommodation and a cost-of-living crisis.
- The student experience is not inclusive, and this is reinforced by the commitment, structures, culture and use of evidence within the HEIs.
- There is not a way of defining commuter students, and little use of data and evidence to make commuters visible and to improve their experience.
- The WPA model has been a useful to critique the commuter student experience and make recommendations for change.
- There is an urgent need for change at various levels, from classroom experiences, to institutional, regional and national transformation.
- **Digital education and AI offer a wealth of solutions that would benefit many students, not just commuter students, and would allow modern students to thrive rather than choose between education and other commitments.**

Pilot project: 2026-27

- Builds on this [research](#) to implement and evaluate institutional change.
- Partners: Atlantic Technological University, Dundalk Institute of Technology, University of Galway and Maynooth University.
- Review the current commuter student population via a survey.
- Review the current institutional offer through commuter student lens.
- Institutional teams will be supported to implement and evaluate at least three '[quick wins](#)' informed by the research and utilising existing tool/resources.
- Teams will review their enabling environment and make a plan for longer-term more significant transformation.

Partners: Dr Carina Ginty, ATU; Dr Moira Maguire, DKIT; Prof Ciara Meehan and Jane Ennis, University of Galway; Prof Tim Thompson, Maynooth University



Thank you Q&A Discussion

- How could you use digital education to implement quick wins in your role to be 'commuter compassionate'?
- How could digital resources be used to provide commuter students more voice within your organisation?
- How could you collaborate with others to improve the commuter student experience?

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Reports: [Full report](#)