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Does commuting to university influence students' personal and professional development and the likelihood of graduate level employment?

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Abstract

The current UK university system is based on the traditional home-university model of transition that has customarily seen students moving away from home to study for their degree. However, within the current massified and marketised conditions of higher education the number of students choosing to commute to study whilst living at home is increasing annually. This may be driven by a number of pressures, including the costs of university life, part-time work, family responsibilities and/or personal confidence.

Whilst commuting to study may be a financially rational decision that provides commuter students with a different way of attending to meet their distinctive learning needs, research suggests that commuter students may also experience emotional and social challenges that may influence their personal and professional development, which in turn may impact on their ability to access and contribute to graduate employment.

This paper explores the potential benefits and challenges experienced by commuter students and suggests that their personal circumstances and the tensions between home and university life may influence the likelihood of, and their ability to, develop personally and professionally in the way that graduate employers expect and desire. Consequently, commuter students may secure fewer graduate roles than their peers opting for the traditional home-university model of transition and employers may miss good candidates who possess the different but equally valuable employment skills and experience that commuter students are able to offer. This paper may be of interest to universities, current undergraduates and potential employers seeking the personal and professional development of future graduate employees.

Key words: Commuter students; Personal and professional development; traditional home-university model of transition

Introduction

The traditional home-university model of transition, based on moving away from home to go to university no longer fits a changed higher education environment. Thomas and Jones, (2017) suggest that it was designed for school leavers accepting university places and attending universities before the expansion of HE provision in 1992. Universities have now become mass market education providers and educators are currently rethinking teaching delivery under the reality of Covid-19. This constantly evolving higher education environment suggests that it is now timely to question whether the current higher education environment is able to sustain this traditional rite of passage (Smith, 2018), and whether university and employer expectations need to adapt to recognise the experiences of the growing number of students who live at home whilst studying for their degree, i.e.commuter students.

Within the current massified and marketised environment of higher education, typified by high tuition fees and the absence of maintenance grants (Lynch, 2006), the number of commuter students (Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2016) is increasing year-on-year thus challenging the traditional provisions of a university experience. In the UK an average of 25% of students are now commuting to study (Donnelly and Gamsu, 2018). However, for some universities, this increases to more than more than half of their students (e.g. the Universities of Birmingham City, Derby, Staffordshire).

Within the home-university model of transition students participated in an integrated academic, cultural and social experience by moving to a university which was largely detached from their previous life and environment. Through this they built lifelong personal and professional networks, developed their social capital and continued into excellent employment outcomes (Maguire and Morris, 2018). However, many commuter students have taken on their studies as an additional commitment in their life (Kember & Leung, 2004) and consequently being a student is not their primary identity (Keeling, 1999). For many, their prioritising of academic work, behind employment and/or family life, can have both positive and negative consequences (Forbus, Newbold and Mehta, 2010) and their experience of differing roles and responsibilities to those of their residential colleagues drive different ways of attending, with different learning and personal development needs and a changed university experience (Lowe and Gayle, 2007; Thomas and Jones, 2017) that can be much more consumer centred (Duarte, Ramos-Pires and Gonçalves, 2014).

This paper explores some of these benefits and challenges faced by commuter students and considers how they may affect their personal and professional development and ability to conform to traditional employer expectations of graduate recruits.

The context of attending university as a commuter student

The literature exploring the experience of commuter students suggests a number of motivating factors come into play in making a decision to attend a local university and travel as required or move to a more distant location. Influences on the choice to live at home and commute to university include cost of attending university (Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2016; Woodley, 2017; Lightfoot, 2018), family commitments (Lightfoot, 2018), existing employment (Thomas and Jones, 2017), social class (Maguire and Morris, 2018), ethnicity (Morris, 2018), confidence (Thomas and Jones, 2017), and existing support networks (Maguire and Morris, 2018 ; Thomas and Jones, 2017).

Students in the most disadvantaged social class are three times more likely to commute to university than those in the highest social class; many of these commuter students are also more likely to be carers, parents, mature students or the first generation in their families to enter higher education (Maguire and Morris, 2018; Lightfoot, 2018). Frequently this means that students have multiple conflicting pressures and limited support when enrolled in higher education (Maguire and Morris, 2018). In addition, students from ethnic minority backgrounds are also more likely to be short-distance commuters; 71% of British Bangladeshi and 66% of British Pakistani students are commuter students, compared to only 19% of white British students (Maguire and Morris, 2018).

These circumstances suggest that the personal and professional development expected of graduate employees through traditional social and academic integration into the university becomes unlikely. However, commuter students may develop these skills through their other life which may not be identified by potential employers, thus in prioritising in recruitment criteria experiences developed through traditional home-university model of transition, organisations may unintentionally exclude excellent candidates.

Benefits perceived for commuter students

The decision to live at home whilst studying for a degree may be a financially rational decision (Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2016; Woodley, 2017) despite the cost of commuting. Lightfoot, (2018) suggests the trebling of tuition fees in 2013 and scrapping of maintenance grants has made living at home popular, particularly among less well-off students. This also allows many students to retain their existing local part-time jobs to help fund their studies.

In addition to economic benefits, social benefits can be perceived for commuter students. The maintenance of family, religious and/or community support networks may offer protection against change, particularly for the less confident students, whilst living at home may help learners become less distracted by the traditional university social life, allowing them to concentrate more on their studies (Maguire and Morris, 2018).

Challenges for commuter students

Despite the recognition of some benefits from living at home and commuting to university, there is a general recognition that commuter students frequently experience social and emotional disadvantages which negatively impact on their personal and professional development (Christie, 2007; Meuleman et al, 2015; Meehan and Howells, 2018). These range from less engagement in their learning, less satisfaction with their academic experiences and lower degree attainment than their peers living in student accommodation (Meuleman et al, 2015; Pokorny, Holley and Kane, 2016, Lightfoot, 2018). The reasons for lower attainment are many and complex, involving the conflicts of commuting and home life in a system that traditionally is designed to accommodate residential attendance. However, perhaps the most significant difference in terms of personal and professional outcomes is that commuter students secure fewer graduate roles than their peers living in student accommodation (Holton and Finn, 2018). This may be because the expectations and practices of graduate recruiters are designed around the graduate skills and experiences emanating from the home-university model of transition.

Commuter students are likely to be more isolated from other students outside formal classes and have limited engagement with university life as they may have more work, social, cultural or religious commitments beyond being a student (Jacoby, 2000; Lightfoot, 2018). These conflicts for time and attention may limit commuter students' ability to participate in peer learning and mutual support, resulting in weaker academic support networks and lower academic attainment which may directly impact their academic success (Thomas, 2012) and employability prospects (Yorke and Longden, 2008).These may be compounded by the practical challenges of travelling, timetabling, financing their studies and the potential lack of support from families who are unaware of what being a student entails (Neves and Hillman, 2018). Together these frequently combine to ensure that commuter students cannot generate a sense of belonging to their university that has been shown to promote skill development, self-efficacy, motivation, persistence and resilience (Lord et al., 2012; Lima, 2014; Priest, Saucier, & Eiselein, 2016; Fernades et al., 2017). Consequently, they may not benefit from their university career in personal and professional development as much as their peers who live at university (Maguire and Morris, 2018).

Impact on personal and professional growth

The benefits and challenges of being a commuter student may influence individuals' priorities, so that many choose to focus simply on academic studies rather than undertaking the extra-curricular activities that can help to develop relationships, resilience, and higher order cognitive skills (Astin, 1985; Dwyer, 2017; Sims, Luebsen and Guggari-Peel, 2017) which can link to an increased sense of satisfaction, belonging and integration into university life (Humphrey and Lowe, 2017). Together these provide potential advantages for employability (Stuart et al, 2009) and contribute to the demonstration of employment skills and personal and professional development that are demanded by future graduate employers.

Commuter students' personal development may also be impacted by the challenge of transitioning from child, sibling, parent, or partner to independent adult learner and back again on a daily basis (Southall, Wason and Avery, 2016). Whilst peers living at university are required to learn to be a student and unlearn to be a school or college pupil upon joining their university (O'Shea, 2014), commuter students experience multiple forms of transition each day resulting in ongoing changes in identity and self-concept (Southall, Wason and Avery, 2016) which may result in uncertainty and anxiety (Fisher, Cavanagh and Bowles, 2011). These multiple forms of transition and consequent anxiety may impact on commuter students' likelihood of learning (Tinto, 1993) and their ability to develop personally and professionally.

Benefits of employing commuter students
By focusing on traditional recruitment criteria i.e. extra-curricular enhancement activities as well as academic outcomes (Thomas and Jones, 2017), designed to evaluate the suitability of candidates from the traditional home-university model of transition, employers may underestimate the ability of commuter students who possess different but equally valuable employment skills and life experiences. These skills possessed by commuter students may include a focus on personal achievement (Thomas and Jones, 2017), the budget management that most professionals need (Cooper et al. 2002), and critical thinking (Timmons, 2014). Whilst it is acknowledged that critical thinking skills may not be developed within the traditional home-university transition model, commuter students may have simply developed them outside of this (Maguire and Morris, 2018). In addition, commuter students may offer a geographically stable workforce who have become experienced at commuting and managing multiple demands on their time.

Not only may potential graduate employers be missing these valuable skills and life experiences , organisations may also limit the diversity of their workforce (Zwyson and Longhi, 2016) thus overlooking the competitive advantage that diversity can offer (Rosenweig, 1998) along with its problem solving skills, innovation and creativity (Reynolds and Lewis, 2017).

Conclusion

Current data indicates that a growing number of university students are eschewing the traditional model of moving away from home to attend university, and instead are commuting. However, existing research suggests that university and employer expectations of students and graduates may not have altered to reflect this new reality. This has two key implications for commuter students' ability to achieve graduate employment. In the first place, the traditional mechanisms of academic, personal and professional development offered by universities may be more challenging for commuter students to access, with consequent implications for their engagement and achievement at university. Employers who fail to recognise those greater challenges risk overlooking students whose abilities are not reflected in their university attainment. In the second place, employer

expectations of student engagement in the extra-curricular development offered by universities may lead them to ignore the significant skills and competences commuter students have developed, partly through the commuting experience. To avail themselves of the advantages of a diverse workforce, employers need to ensure their recruitment processes recognise the skills, determination and resilience commuter students can bring.

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