The experience of commuting and living at home: how does it affect the engagement of BME students with the university and their learning?

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Context

In 2015, a Leeds Beckett University project explored the student attainment gap for good degrees for UK BME students in those five of our courses with the largest number of enrolled BME students in the University (Smith, 2017). In 2014-15, in common with the wider national picture in Higher Education (HE), there was a significant disparity between the percentage achievement of good degrees (Firsts and 2:1 classification) between the white students (64%, who comprise 84% of the total institutional student population) and the BME students (49%, who comprise 16% of the total institutional student population). After controlling for UCAS tariff points on entry, we confirmed that this attainment gap existed across all the degree programmes. Reasons for the attainment gap are complex, and multiple factors – structural, organisational, attitudinal, cultural and financial – are all of significance (Richardson, 2008a & b; Loke and Berry, 2011; Singh, 2011; Archer and Hutchings, 2000). Clegg, Stevenson and Willott (2009) have discussed the social and cultural capital of different student groups and emphasised that staff, when designing university curricula, should take account of the wide variety of material and contextual aspects of the lives of their students and the constraints some may face.

Indeed, the literature indicates that the degree attainment gap is strongly related to the experience of teaching and learning at a university and to students' engagement with learning at their institution (Stevenson, 2012; Office for Fair Access (OFFA), 2015).

As part of the original project and within the broader context of examining our own BME student attainment gap, we analysed the the living-at-home rates of BME undergraduate students and held focus groups with twenty BME undergraduate students studying on the five large courses to explore their learning experience. Half the students in these original focus groups were commuters. In addition, we conducted a focus group with the leaders of the five large courses. These focus groups explored the factors, barriers, benefits, experiences and challenges for BME students in terms of their engagement with university life and studying. Data from these groups revealed a preoccupation with commuting-related stresses and challenges and their possible impact upon BME students' engagement and perceived sense of belonging. It therefore seemed justified to undertake a more focused project, exploring the commuting students' engagement with their institution and their learning experience.

In 2014-15, the living-at-home rates of the BME students were strikingly high compared to non-BME students: across our five courses, an average of 53.4% of our BME students lived at home, compared to 18% of their non-BME student peers. This pattern remained unchanged in 2015-16. This is markedly above the national average for all undergraduate living-at-home students. For example, an analysis of the HESA statistics (2015) showed that, nationally, 19% of undergraduate students commuted; three years later, that figure had risen slightly to 22% (Marsh, 2014; BIS, 2014) – a significant portion of the student body, mainly because of the rise of tuition fees and persistent concerns about debt.

It is an institution's responsibility to ensure provision of opportunities and support for all new students to participate actively in their course. The National Union of Students (NUS) drew attention (NUS, 2015) to the probability that the challenges faced by students living in halls or in the private rented sector are often more visible to a university than those faced by students living at home. Since the experiences of the latter may be hidden or invisible, the institution may not be meeting the needs of these groups of students.

Background literature

For the purpose of this paper, commuter students are defined as those who travel into university from their parents' or their own family home, which they lived in prior to entering university. This project included only the experiences of full-time undergraduates, but, of course, commuting students can be full- and part-time postgraduates, too. Dante, Fabris and Palese (2013) found that living over thirty minutes from campus directly correlated with medical students' likelihood of academic failure. State University (2013), cited in Helsen (2013), suggests that commuter students felt, because of their travel commitments, that they lacked the extra time to devote to finding resources or to talk to teaching staff.

This paper explores the intersectionality of the experiences and engagement of our BME students who live at home *and* commute to campus. It outlines a range of current and proposed recommended actions taken across Leeds Beckett University to support new BME students living at home to become active participants in their own learning in the early stages of their undergraduate course. Many of the difficulties that the BME students raised may actually be applicable to *all* commuting students – for example: a reduced sense of belonging; finding it harder to engage with on-campus group work; feeling unable to access information easily; not being aware of the value of university extra-curricular life; caring and financial commitments and concerns; attendance at family and religious holidays; feeling that their timetable does not wholly optimise their effective learning. All of these might contribute to reduced attendance by and engagement of *all* commuting students. However, home living might have greater impact on BME students, who are already victims of the attainment gap (Clegg *et al.*, 2009).

Students' active participation in classes, in their courses and in university life is a desirable undergraduate attribute. However, emerging evidence suggests that this may be an area of concern. Baik, Naylor and Arkoudis, (2015) report that, in Australian universities, increasing numbers of students miss classes and a large proportion of all students report never working with classmates outside classes and also never working with other students on projects during class. Participation and engagement is clearly *not* just an issue for BME students and/or commuting students.

In many UK institutions, student charters provide a guide to expectations in terms of engagement and behaviour**.** These can be useful but universities are limited in terms of being able to influence *directly* an individual's active participation. At best, 'active participation' should comprise explicit and proactive consultations, whereby "opportunities are provided for students to express individual opinions, perspectives, experiences, ideas and concerns" (HEA and NUS, 2011), or extend to student partnerships in co-development or co-review of their courses. For commuting students, engagement in their courses could be limited by such challenges to their participation as having difficulties getting to campus, spending less time with fellow student peers and a reduced or different sense of belonging. If

participation by this group of commuting BME students with diverse motivations and goals is to be encouraged, then, as Pickford (2016) states, it is necessary to identify the support and opportunities that could usefully be provided from the start of their HE experiences.

There is a host of reasons why many students (not just BME students) may choose to commute, ranging from location and finance to convenience and social influences (Collier, 2013). However, as Newbold, Mehta and Forbus (2011) note, commuting, by its very nature, has the ability to diminish students' academic and social university experience. They suggest that HE institutions should adopt some form of support for commuter students, ensuring they receive as positive an experience as do non-commuting students.

For many students in the UK, moving away from home to go to university is a traditional rite of passage. The belief that university involves moving away is so ingrained in our culture that only 20% of full-time students in the UK live with their parents during the course, a far smaller proportion than is to be found in the majority of countries in Europe (NUS, 2015). Staff working in HE might assume that living in halls or private rented accommodation is the normal default position and, indeed, regard it as a 'better option' to maximise an individual's university experience and journey to full autonomous learner and individual independence. As a result, the necessity to adapt activity to meet the needs of students living at home may be unintentionally ignored.

Living at home involves commuting to campus; since such travel takes time, on-campus hours are reduced, with concomitant detrimental impact on face-to-face engagement. Apart from the 20% of mature students who live in family homes, students who commute are more likely than the general student population to be from poorer backgrounds and to define as BME. The reasons are multifactorial: cultural attitudes (especially for female BME students), caring responsibilities, financial considerations and the need for access to part-time employment. All of these create barriers to engaging either in learning beyond the classroom or in other activities such as clubs and societies or volunteering. In turn, this may reduce the sense of belonging to the university, something increasingly recognised as a major factor in retention (Thomas, 2012).

Of course, students do not have to commute to face time pressures. Indeed, some staff in the original focus group stated that non-BME, campus-living students were frequently late, complained of time pressure and had poor attendance and engagement. However, factoring in living situations may be useful in planning certain activities. For example, if classes generally finish at 5 p.m., having employability workshops put on at 7.30 p.m. might be too long a wait for a commuter student. Scheduling important module assessment briefing sessions at a convenient time in the middle of the day or at a pre-identified gap in a student-centred timetable might help to maximise attendance.

There is no single way of addressing these students' needs. It is true that some commuter students will desire the 'normative' student experience and will regret not being able to participate as fully as they would like; thus, adjusting to their needs will help. Others will view HE in more utilitarian or 'transactional' (Pickford, 2017, p.27) terms; for them, attending classes to gain a qualification, often with a specific career in mind, will be a key driver and they may not be as interested in engaging beyond this.

Methodology

A broadly interpretative approach was adopted for this mixed-methods project with a focus on qualitative inquiry (Cresswell, 2007) and action research (Healey *et al.*, 2010) to explore the commuter students' experiences. This was a sub-project of our larger project, which explored BME student attainment (Smith, 2017) on five of our largest courses.

All the living-at-home BME students on the five identified courses (Accounting and Finance, Business and Management, Law, Sports and Exercise Science and Childhood Studies) which had the largest number of BME students enrolled in 2014-15, were invited via email to attend a two-hour focus group meeting. Identity confidentiality was assured and only the focus group facilitator and the note taker knew who had attended. Potential student participants were asked in the invitation to think in advance about their university learning experience. Focus groups were chosen as an appropriate interactive method for data collection, because they explore – through in-depth discussion, insight, and group dynamics (Gill *et al.*, 2008) – participants' rich experiences and perceptions. Four focus groups, with twenty commuting and non-commuting BME students from across the University, were undertaken for the initial attainment gap project over a period of six weeks and these student participants were encouraged to tell us stories about their learning experiences, institutional engagement and sense of belonging. Many talked about living at home and feeling marginalised and 'disconnected' from the University culture.

This precipitated the convening of a follow-up focus group involving a further six invited BME undergraduate living-at-home and commuting students from all years. Students were asked to tell their narrative stories and experiences of living at home and commuting in to the campus. These stories were triggered by a semi-structured question schedule (generated from the thematic analysis of the issues raised in the focus group of all BME students) which focused specifically on the commuting students' stories, their University experience, the challenges of commuting, their engagement with academic work and social and cultural University activities. Having been asked to explain what was good about their sense of belonging and the inclusiveness of the University, participants were then invited to address problems they had raised and make suggestions, with a view to identifying potential active interventions for improvement.

Findings

A content analysis of the transcripts of the narrative of the second-stage focus group (BME commuting students only) was undertaken; the findings are outlined below:

Students' perceptions of the benefits of living at home

Students had clearly made an active, positive choice to stay at home, valuing both the cost savings and the domestic support and home-grown social network this domestic arrangement offered. They tended to socialise with family members and pre-existing friendship groups from school or their cultural networks. In addition, they also valued the 'preparation time' a train or bus journey allowed.

> *"I use the time on the train to do prep or reading or stuff …. I leave the work things that need concentration for when I can go to the library. The train time is actually useful."* – First-year student

"I live locally anyway - what would be the point of shelling out £100 week when, for a few further miles, I can live at home and be with my pre-uni friends and my cousins."
– First-year student

The issues and challenges

1. Timetabling

This was clearly an issue: the long gaps between sessions, particularly in the first year, made students restless and unproductive.

"The large gaps were frustrating in the first part of the first year. I struggled to fill time from lunch to 5pm. Then in the second year I got organised and started using the gaps better for work. I am in my last year now and really use the gaps for my dissertation." – Third-year student

2. Mixed groups and the difficulty of being on-campus for group projects

In the main, this was relatively positive. It was notable that, often, it was the commuter students who led negotiations with their student peers regarding meeting times for collaborative project work.

"I now tend to organise it [meeting up for study] *around my timetable and everyone is really flexible. We do the work and then go out for lunch."* – First-year student

Students sought out social learning spaces, negotiated timings and booked rooms for mixed-group working. They also clearly appreciated the online discussion forums, remote access via the student portal and online social networks which enhanced group learning.

3. The students' 'sense of belonging' to the course and University

The commuter students felt they had made a positive choice to commute, citing their child care, *"feeling secure and settled"* and financial concerns as key reasons for preferring to live at home. However, difficulties with such infrastructural matters as hand-in-times, storage facilities, non-student-friendly timetabling and poorly-timetabled evening sessions could make some of them feel *"left out"* and as if they were *"looking in"*. This sense of exclusion was exacerbated by the general problems that all BME students experience at university, where teaching delivery, non-diverse reading lists, patchy inclusive approaches to course design and lack of diversity in the content of some traditional curricula compound this feeling of otherness (Smith, 2017).

4. The practicalities of commuting

Students described anxieties about: being late; the tiring nature of the journey; not having a lift share; having nowhere to store bags, lab coats and boots; not knowing the location of local living-at-home fellow students who could share travel costs.

"We all come in together on the train. Sometimes we are together in a car. Sometimes the lecturer splits us all up when we arrive!" – Second-year student

5. The nature of participation

This varied across the group. Some wished only *"to gain a qualification"* and use the University for utilitarian reasons – coming and going as they liked and not being aware of or actively taking part in clubs, societies or social events, none of which they valued.

"I just want to get a good degree…I get my social life at home really with my friends I had before Uni. I stay on for things sometimes in the evening but would rather just get home." – Second-year student

Others seemed to regret not participating fully and wanted more opportunity to make suggestions for events and social opportunities with students on other courses, particularly *"at lunchtimes where it is good and easy to socialise"*.

6. The role of the family

The interviewees also raised intriguing questions about the role of family on academic outcomes - are they a negative influence or does living in the parental home provide an educational benefit through increased support?

"It can be distracting living at home. I have a big family. I work on all my assessments in the library. I come in at morning to get work done otherwise in the evenings my family likes me to go places with them." – Second-year student

Discussion

The practical infrastructure: The findings revealed that, for some, commuting can be tiring and stressful. Many first-year students had not anticipated the full extent of this prior to joining the University. They described a range of practical problems which compounded their difficulties with commuting. 'Non-commuter-friendly' student lecture timetables were a big issue. First-year students disliked having gaps in the day, with some stating that they often returned home at the beginning of a gap and did not come back, whereas final-year students wanted time at the University in the day so they could write up dissertations and project work. Although some students had the option for personalised timetables (so they could choose repeat-seminar times to suit them), others did not have this. Difficulties affecting this group were consistent with those identified by other research into commuting students' experiences: the lack of available social-learning space at lunchtime to do collaborative project work; the need for more lunchtime and early-evening networking and career-based events; the requirement to hand in copies of assessment early in the day; scheduled early starts; the lack of on-site storage.

Making a positive choice: Despite all these logistical problems, created by structures beyond their own control, all the commuting students felt that commuting to University was a sensible, practical, cost-saving and active choice. In our sample, the positive, focused approach to study and the pragmatic solution-finding were notable.

In addition, many students expressed their commitment to their families, enjoyed the ready-made social and cultural networks linked to family activities and to their religious and social traditions and stated that, by choosing to commute, they could actively commit to childcare and family responsibilities. Of significance was the recognition that living in the parental or family home could be distracting, but, to compensate, they had all developed finely-tuned time management skills and coping strategies. In general, (particularly after a period of acculturation in the first year of study) they used their on-campus time to engage academically in the timetabled sessions, worked on "*more complex concentrated work in the library during the day because it was quieter*" and used the actual travel time to do reading and preparation. Beyond the first semester, they began to use the timetables to structure their independent learning - using gaps between sessions for peer learning and using the library. The twenty-four-hour library opening hours allowed those with caring responsibilities to visit the library at weekends, taking advantage of lighter traffic and using family networks and partners to provide childcare. Final-year students, in particular, liked a free day in the week to concentrate on their project work and not have to commute. All the students valued the lecture-capture system and University information provided on the online Student Hub which they accessed easily while off campus.

Maximising the use of on-campus time: They discussed how they wanted on-campus time to be "*really worthwhile*" so they could be "*good students*" and "*get a good mark and degree*". There did seem, however, only partial awareness that the University could provide enhanced social and cultural engagement compared to their own home networks. The commuting students also talked about how they negotiated with their non-commuting cohort peers who lived in University-provided accommodation, particularly when they had group project work or team activities to complete as part of course work. They described high-level time-management skills, a commitment by all the students to compromise and the use of online meeting tools to schedule sessions to suit all. They described how most of their collaborative learning was undertaken at lunchtime or in timetable gaps in social-learning spaces. The social activity which stemmed from this interaction was a supplementary by-product of the prioritisation of the academic work collaboration. This supports the Student Engagement Partnership report findings of Thomas and Jones (2017), which indicate that commuting students tend to prioritise academic engagement over social and cultural engagement.

Commuting BME students under-participated in student social events, saying they were usually timed for the evenings and assumed a physical on-site presence. Many participants did not access University-run volunteering activity, careers events or sports teams which were held in the evening. One-off activities were easier to schedule, but the commuting students tended to use their own home networks for a sustained commitment to sport and social activities in the evening and at weekends. Many students valued one-off University-organised networking and careers events which took place at lunchtimes or early evening and taking on student ambassadorial roles which linked to the academic sphere and were generally undertaken during the working day.

Building social and cultural capital: Universities can provide durable social links, opportunities for networking and an environment for building knowledge and intellectual skill as part of their educational provision. This social and cultural capital is valuable and can enhance social mobility (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977). Belonging to a wide range of groups and networks builds social capital. Nevertheless, just 'belonging' may not be enough

(Raskoff, 2014; Thomas, 2002). Each sports club commitment, student ambassador event, networking event, talk by an expert visiting speaker and visit to the careers hub exposes the student to the potential to grow her/his social capital. Cultural capital can be developed through: deep learning; further reading; developing a critical lens; shared discussion about learning; listening to and witnessing the values and behaviours of others in discursive activities in the classroom. All of this is built, not just through online transactions, or 'dip-in-and-dip-out' lecture attendance and working alone in the library, but through sustained immersion in the social and cultural activities of the university.

It is important to mention that there is clearly some social and cultural capital to be gained from home living - many commuting students used family links to gain insight into the workplace, but there was a sense that "*getting a good degree*" was the priority. Some of our first-in-the-family-to-go-to-university participants stated that their parents valued a good degree, but had little awareness of wider university culture. Some home-living students may be missing out on the opportunities for developing wider social and cultural capital that universities can provide. Universities need to ask if BME commuting students are really using the institution to the maximum. Are all the students and their families aware of the benefits of wider social engagement for their careers? Is the university valuing their home experiences enough and incorporating an articulation of race, cultural values, habitus (Abrahams and Ingram, 2013) and aspiration into on-campus and online sessions? How can the university, through more inclusive practice, offer more lunchtime activities and networking events, to augment the added value of the social and cultural capital that university brings, not just to these BME commuting students, but, indeed, to all students.

Inclusive practice in HE should not be a special or separate activity – it is just very good practice which benefits all students (commuting or otherwise) to achieve their potential and take advantage of all a university has to offer. Any interventions need to take into account the voices of *all* groups (including the often-bypassed commuting student), to be flexible, inclusive and targeted *directly* at the students at course level and to acknowledge that students are not all homogeneous in their living arrangements.

Identified Actions

So far, this University, in partnership with the Students' Union and staff, has addressed the needs of the students in ways below. As part of the action research approach (Healey *et al.*, 2010; Smith, 2017) used for the methodology, the participants were asked for possible solutions for the challenges they faced. A commitment to continue to seek more data through talking to the commuting students will enhance what has already been achieved by this small-scale project. The solutions have been actioned and implemented in partnership with Services, the students and staff.

1. *Focus on induction and clarifying expectations of being at university*

- Clarity of expectations of student responsibilities in terms of their engagement;
- Consideration of activities in terms of timing/timetabling to allow for all students to arrive at campus;
- A more inclusive approach to induction activities – traditionally, some activities and discussion might have been focused on students leaving home and feeling homesick. Induction activity can often start from the position that the student must have just

moved out of home, whereas an approach which modifies content to account for commuter students, rather than putting on completely separate events for them, would not only be simpler, but also convey a more inclusive message.

2. Facilitating access to online resources

There is increasingly comprehensive remote access to resources to help with academic advice and student support, mainly via an updated Student Hub.

All areas of the Student Hub website have a range of information and resources, including Money, Disability, International, Employability, etc.

In addition, the University's Student Wellbeing website has links to information on a range of topics and access to online self-help resources and telephone support, including telephone counselling, and is available for those students who are not able to come on to campus. For students who are not campus-based and need advice, Skype to, and phone appointments with, the Disability Advice team are available.

The Money Advice Team operates a Telephone Advice Line as the main route in for students accessing the service. Student feedback and analysis of call data suggests that the University receives many calls from students based outside the local area. As no appointment is needed, this makes the money advisers more accessible to commuting students and distance learners. Within the Hardship Fund, one of the factors taken into account in the assessment is where the student is travelling from. For the majority of applicants, travel support is then taken up in the form of a travel card for the local area. Where a student is commuting from further afield, this is reflected in the assessment calculation. One of the criteria for accessing the funding is that students have to experience unexpected financial hardship. Many of our commuter students underestimate the likely travel costs and this is shortfall is exacerbated by increases in fuel/public transport costs. These financial considerations for commuter students are now explicitly addressed at University open days and included in University website content.

In terms of learning resources, the University's 'Skills for Learning' website gives access to a wide range of resources accessible off-campus and there is an increased institutional commitment to stock e-books accessible to all students at a distance. A site licence is held for key assistive software to mind-map ideas, assist with research, referencing and proofreading and access materials in alternative formats (e.g. audio) – this software is available to all students. Lecture capture is currently adopted by some staff, enabling students to view missed sessions or replay them in order to facilitate greater engagement.

3. Estate and infrastructural measures to enhance independent and collaborative learning

The University is currently reviewing its learning space provision and is developing the idea of spaces that can accommodate commuter students either by facilitating quick transactions/engagement or by providing dwell space to enable an all-day, on-

campus stay. The aim is to provide the provision of easily-bookable learning spaces and a range of social learning spaces for all students to maximise their learning.

Gaps in sessions, particularly in the first year, appear to encourage reduced engagement, 'drifting' back home and not returning. Early starts, late finishes and assessment hand-in deadlines early in the day are similarly challenging for commuting students. Summative assessment is now, therefore, handled mainly online, at times on weekdays when academic and IT support is on hand. Hard copy submission is now required at any point within a window of time rather than at a specified hour. The University has introduced personalised timetabling in some courses to optimise student seminar choice and it now consults all students (including commuting students) extensively about their timetabling needs; to assist this, it is piloting the use of CMISGo, an app which personalises timetables and makes students aware of lunchtime and on-campus activities.

4. *Enhancement of the students' sense of belonging*

The University should develop an institutional culture where living at home and living in halls have perceived equal and 'normal' status. Approaches to more inclusive teaching and learning practice and curricular design to support BME students have been adopted in order to address this (Smith, 2017). These include; i) new, inclusive course design and assessment resources for staff; ii) specific learning and teaching events focusing on inclusive practice; iii) a review of the diversity of reading list content; iv) working in partnership with more BME student course representatives to augment their own student voice; v) ways to enhance social and cultural capital by using all student experiences; vi) working with academic staff to make face-to-face sessions worthwhile, interactive, discursive and inclusive.

In the focus groups, students and staff described how commuting students would travel together in cars and arrive en masse at the lecture theatre or classroom if they were on the same course. Staff recognised the need to be proactive in their classroom management techniques by encouraging the physical movement of *all* students to encourage social mixing and the sharing of ideas and experiences through paired activities and new contacts. There has also been discussion in many of our Schools about proactive intervention in the make-up of seminar/project/activity groups, in order to challenge the natural tendency of friends and commuting peers to sit together (particularly in the first year) and thereby to encourage exchange of ideas and social contact between participants who don't usually gravitate towards each other.

In addition, we are working with students to review our students' support framework to provide more online pastoral and mentoring support and to raise the awareness and value of using academic personal tutors. The Students' Union (SU) is considering the provision of more activities at lunchtime and in the early evening. Staff and student lunchtime mindfulness sessions are popular and run by our student Wellbeing team.

The University has also committed to employing Student Liaison Officers - former graduates who provide advice to all students via email and telephone. For a student who is commuting, they will try to include information about Leeds and the local area (if appropriate), to help the student feel part of the wider student community.

Conclusion

As reflected in Thomas and Jones (2017), universities should aim to develop an institutional culture where living at home or living in halls has perceived equal, 'normal' status, whilst balancing it with a recognition that the 'commuter student' lens is a very useful way of examining these particular students' experiences and ensuring that they remain visible and are reflected in the institutional discourse and planned actions.

Practical institutional support: Within the sector, other institutions are addressing commuter students' needs, usually at university level rather than at course level. Student societies and networks (run by Students' Unions) help living-at-home students buddy up, share lifts and information, run specific webinars and events to extend online networking and, ultimately, build social capital and enhance employability.

Effective consultation for effective practice: Whilst many university prospectuses have a separate section exploring on-campus accommodation, they do not consistently have text which explores the experience and needs of commuter students. Students living at home will have specific needs and universities need to consult with them and reflect those needs in emergent policies and practice. However, these commuting students do not need s*eparate* policies or activities – this may only undermine cohesion. As discussed, many BME commuting students seemed unaware of the wider role that the University could play beyond the degree award alone. The active promotion of events which directly raise students' awareness of the benefits that they bring should be foregrounded.

Students' Unions and universities should specifically build in – as part of the consultation process for new projects, institutional literature, infrastructural issues, induction, course design and course activities – consideration of students living at home and commuting.

Building a sense of belonging: Though the usual social norm of moving away from home to attend university will still apply to some students, a substantial minority (particularly the *majority* of BME students) will continue to choose to live in the parental home. Their needs can be inadvertently overlooked and the sense of belonging, so essential for student retention and satisfaction, can become ignored or diluted. Whilst it is clear that these commuting BME students are still building useful skills in terms of time management, organisation and, to a high level, peer negotiation, they are doing this at the expense of engaging with many of the broader experiences being at university can offer.

Building social and cultural capital: HE institutions need to adopt a more inclusive approach to infrastructural support and to learning and teaching activity, in order to maximise the opportunity for *all* students to be exposed to the different forms of social and cultural capital HE can provide, primarily to engender the sense of belonging so important for retention, and to secure the best possible academic and employment outcomes.

In addition to some of interventions already mentioned in this paper, pre-entry opportunities to meet other commuting students, commuter-student consultation groups, online careers activities, webinars with experts and alumni, course-focused social and cultural enhancement events scheduled at lunchtime and in timetable gaps, targeted commuter student social media use and storage space for commuting students' coats and equipment can all enhance *all* commuter students' sense of belonging and accelerate their exposure to the social and cultural capital that immersion in HE can provide.

Additionally, further investigation is specifically needed into the impact of living with family on: study time; approaches to study; the challenges of student immersion in HE; the impact of sibling and parental influence on the individual student's view of the wider world and society. This might usefully be done using a survey approach with a larger sample of all first-year students. Further research might be indicated into other subgroups of commuting students to investigate new issues, commonalities or clear differences in experiences.

In summary, it is clear that some issues faced by BME commuting students are identical to those faced by all commuting students. The issue is that BME students (commuting and non-commuting) are already often disadvantaged by a poorer learning experience than that of their peers and consequently by lower degree attainment (Richardson, 2008a & b) and reduced employability (Allen, 2016), an inequality that may be compounded in the case of those disproportionately high numbers of BME students who also commute. Staff, students and service professionals in partnership need actively to address the needs of all commuting students in order to contribute to improving their university experience, to facilitate their engagement and go some way to solving at least one element of the multiple, complex factors which cause the BME students' poorer degree attainment.

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