



The impact of commuting on the Student Experience

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In this case study, a staff member and students involved in a summer research programme at Maynooth University, reflect on their experiences of working together to achieve the project research aims. *The impact of commuting on the Student Experience* was a student-staff research project that investigated the effects of commuting on students at Maynooth University (2019–20), through constructing, administering and analysing a student survey and jointly writing an article for publication in a peer-review journal (pending).

Introduction and Context

How did our project come about?

Like many Irish universities (especially those in the Greater Dublin Region), Maynooth University has a large body of student commuters (the university estimates 62% commute daily), and *The impact of commuting on the Student Experience* derived from a desire to hear their voice and understand the impact of commuting upon their university experience.

Each year the Experiential Learning Office at Maynooth University runs and coordinates a large *Summer Programme for Undergraduate Research* (SPUR), in which talented undergraduate students undertake a six-week research position under the mentorship of members of staff. Dr Denis Casey mentored this project in 2019 (alongside Dr Brian McKenzie) and individually in 2020. Margaret Keogh (2019) and Beth McKeague (2019 and 2020) emerged through a competitive application and interview process to form the project's team. Denis participated in an NStEP workshop prior to the project (January 2019) and the *Ten Principles of Student Engagement* subsequently underpinned the project's aims and workings.

Why did we embark on a student-staff partnership?

The 'Student as Partner' (*Principle 2*), in which the 'student is an active member of an institution with which they share a strong sense of allegiance and commitment' most closely aligned to our attempt to understand the impact commuting has on students' capacity to engage with university life in its many forms (Collins 2016, 31). Other aspects of the project's practices also aligned, e.g. Beth and Margaret drove much of their own learning ('Co-creators'; *Principle 5*).

Partnership relationship of mentor-mentee

While the mentor-mentee relationship worked well, thanks to all adopting a practice of being explicit about expectations, roles, role modelling etc., it is an area that would have benefited from more attention. The experience might have been enhanced if all had engaged in a mentorship-mentee training (in addition to the training offered by the Experiential Learning Office), e.g. though taking the badged course *Mentoring in Teaching and Learning* offered by the National Forum for the Enhancement for Teaching and Learning.

How were both staff and students involved in the creation of our work?

While Denis held a mentorship role, it was agreed among all participants that Beth and Margaret were being mentored in the creation of their own project, rather than being directed in the execution of his, i.e. they were expected (and did) to take ownership of it and to make key decisions. For example, in the 2019 creation and execution of the survey on commuting distributed to Maynooth students, it was Beth and Margaret who drew up the initial list of questions and took responsibility for promoting it, and in 2020 Beth choose the journal to which the final article will be submitted. In addition, the article text was drafted collaboratively, with all influencing and giving feedback on each other's writing, and Beth and Margaret are the first-named authors.

Relevance of our case study to student voice, student engagement in decision-making, and/or student partnership.

Our work is of particular relevance, because commuting was shown to negatively affect students in a variety of ways, particularly in terms of student engagement and identifying with their university. The results of our study showed that Maynooth commuter students face barriers that prevent them from engaging with activities that encourage the expression of the student voice or enable them to act in partnership with academic and administrative units within the university. For example, the majority of respondents (69%) did not engage in any enhancement activities that the university offers e.g. working as a Student Ambassador or being an Academic Representative. In line with international trends, these students appear to engage in mental distancing, in that they associate campus activities such as clubs and societies, student government, campus jobs, etc. with residential students (Weiss, 2014). Highlighting these issues within a local and Irish context is intended to contribute to student, staff and institutional responses to the effects of commuting (in line with *Principal 9*, 'Self-criticism and enhance-

Project Outline

Action	Brief Description
Action A	Mentor-mentee agreement Denis and Beth drew up a mentor-mentee agreement in 2020 (using a template supplied by SPUR), making explicit the mechanics of what was expected for project meetings (and individual responsibilities). This had a positive effect in terms of managing meetings, creating accountability and building trust.
Action B	Dedicated online workspace For each of the two years an individual Team was created in MS Teams for the project, in order to create a professional and transparent environment for communication and organising material.
Action C	Student choice on skills development In the first year, Margaret and Beth were afforded the opportunity to develop necessary skills in survey construction, using a MOOC. In the second year (in line with <i>Principle 5</i> 'Students as co-creators') Beth was invited to consider project-relevant skills that she wanted to develop, and she took responsibility for researching MOOC providers and courses, before engaging in one on compiling literature reviews.

Action D	<p>Student-led survey promotion</p> <p>Beth and Margaret took the lead in promoting the survey to the student body in 2019, involving making decisions regarding channels and issues such as incentivisation. In particular they liaised with:</p> <p>Maynooth Students' Union Student Services Maynooth University Chaplaincy Student Engagement Office Admissions Office Maynooth Access Programme Office</p>
Action E	<p>Reflecting and making research visible</p> <p>As part of their SPUR requirements, Beth and Margaret created a poster in 2019 demonstrating their research and reflecting upon their experience. They won the best research poster prize at the SPUR symposium (September 2019) and were chosen to represent Maynooth University internationally, at the British Conference for Undergraduate Research (subsequently cancelled owing to the Covid pandemic).</p>
Action F	<p>Research video pitch</p> <p>In 2020, Beth produced a five-minute video pitch to accompany her research poster, outlining learnings, achievement and collaborations with a variety of individuals and units within the university.</p>

Reflections

As part of their SPUR requirements, Margaret and Beth both engaged in academic reflection, and used materials supplied by the programme (such as Gibb's Reflective Cycle) for that purpose. Denis, likewise, engaged in formal reflection when updating his Strategy Recording Sheet as part of his NstEP-National Forum professional development course (2019–2020).

What worked well during our project

Denis: The mentor-mentee agreement worked well, but it was limited in its focus. In future, I would suggest student-staff partnership agreements such as this should go beyond logistical concerns, and include considerations of areas like professional expectations, role modelling and reverse mentoring (Morris 2017).

Beth: The fact that Denis and Brian allowed us to work independently and take ownership of this project really set it apart from all other work I had conducted in college up to that point as I was only finishing my second year with two years to go. I believe this greatly enhanced my self-confidence and my ability to work on my own initiative. Furthermore, working one-on-one with Margaret meant I enjoyed the benefits of teamwork that can sometimes be lost when working in larger group settings with more interpersonal politics.

Margaret: I felt thorough the process that Denis was very open to different ideas that us the students had regarding how to carry out the research. He encouraged free thinking and then facilitated our ideas, with the resources, skills and support that we needed to see them to fruition. I very much enjoyed the teamwork aspect with my fellow student Beth and felt that we learned a lot from each other throughout the process.

What could have been done differently or needed improvement

Denis: The differentiation between mentoring and research supervision was not always clear, and I am not sure that I struck the right balance. I would have benefited from engaging in mentorship training, and it is something that I might have found even more beneficial had I done so alongside those I was mentoring.

Beth: In hindsight and with increased experience, I know that certain aspects of the survey design could have been conducted differently in order to reach more robust scientific standards. I think it is one of those things that is hard to tackle at the time as the point of the programme was to provide undergraduate students with research experience. I can, however, say with certainty that the experience I gained through the project has facilitated many more research opportunities for which I am extremely grateful.

Margaret: During this process we learned a lot of skills from Denis such as academic skills like brain storming, how to create a social studies survey and how to create a literature review. It would have been great if skills teaching was expanded outside the logistic academic processes to the skills needed to be a good mentor. Beth and I felt Denis was a superb mentor and would have found it useful to gain these skills for ourselves for the future.

Has our project had an impact on student engagement beyond our initial work?

The initial survey results indicate that commuting is a barrier to student engagement, impeding a student from becoming an active member of the university, and by implication hindering a sense of allegiance or commitment. That almost two-thirds of students (64%) also reported that staff (particularly academic staff) were not understanding of their situation is an important consideration in tackling the issue. We hope to use our findings and the publication of our article to influence with the university's student engagement policy and practices.

References

Collins, T., 2016. *Enhancing Student Engagement in Decision-Making*, Report of the Working Group on Student Engagement in Irish Higher Education.

Morris, L., 2017. *Reverse Mentoring: Untapped Resource in the Academy?* *Innovative Higher Education* 42: 285–7. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-017-9405-z>

Weiss, M., 2014. *The College Experience of Commuter Students and the Concepts of Place and Space*. Rhode Island College, Providence, RI. <https://doi.org/10.28971/212014WM91>

Supporting Evidence

Beth McKeague and Margaret Keogh, *The Impact of Commuting on the Student Experience* (poster for the British Conference for Undergraduate Research, 2020).

Beth McKeague, *The Impact of Commuting on the Student Experience* (poster for the SPUR Symposium, 2020).

Beth McKeague, *The Impact of Commuting on the Student Experience* (video research pitch for the SPUR Symposium, 2020).

Denis Casey, *Strategy Recording Sheet* (NStEP-National Forum professional development course, 2019–2020).

